

# 'Thinking About Us' at the Baobab Centre: Recognizing the Moral Agency of Young Survivors of Political and Organized Violence

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## "Pensando sobre nosotros" en el Centro Baobab: El reconocimiento de la agencia moral de jóvenes supervivientes a la violencia política y organizada

**ABSTRACT:** Young survivors of political and organized violence, displaced to countries such as the UK, face multiple exclusions from recognition as moral agents. This paper claims that such exclusions are recognitionally unjust. This injustice is based in the claim that failures to recognize survivors' moral agency frustrate their abilities to develop a positive psychological sense of their own moral agency, and thus frustrate their abilities to rebuild their lives. The paper will address four conceptual roots of the denial of moral agency to this population: childhood as a period of 'becoming' an adult, ideals of childhood innocence, an individualized rather than social approach to mental health and finally theories of moral agency that exclude children and those with mental health diagnoses. Shifts in societal attitudes will be suggested as remedies to these injustices.

**RESUMEN:** Los supervivientes jóvenes de la violencia política y organizada desplazados a países como Reino Unido se enfrentan a múltiples exclusiones respecto de la atribución de un sentido de agencia moral.

Este artículo defiende que tales exclusiones son injustas en términos de reconocimiento. Esta injusticia se basa en la tesis de que los fallos en el reconocimiento de la agencia moral de los supervivientes frustra sus habilidades para desarrollar un sentido psicológico positivo de los mismos, de su propia agencia, frustrando así sus habilidades para reconstruir sus vidas. El artículo tratará cuatro raíces conceptuales de la negación de la agencia moral a esta población: la infancia como un periodo de "llegar a ser" un adulto, las idealizaciones sobre la inocencia de la infancia, una aproximación individualista más que social de la salud mental, y, por último, las teorías de la agencia moral que excluyen a los niños y a aquellos con diagnósticos en salud mental. Por último, se sugerirán algunos cambios en las actitudes sociales como remedios para estas injusticias.

**KEYWORDS:** moral agency, recognitional justice, childhood, mental health, political violence, trauma, refugees

**PALABRAS-CLAVE:** agencia moral, justicia del reconocimiento, infancia, salud mental, violencia política, trauma, refugiados

*"My difficulties stop me sleeping - feeling worried all the time, not feeling safe, I don't sleep normally, my body is strong, but my brain is weak. I can't make decisions, my social worker made me cry, I can't make decisions. Paralyzed in decisions."*  
(Baobab Centre, 2014, 9)

The Baobab Centre for Young Survivors in Exile is a non-residential therapeutic community for young refugees and asylum seekers in North London. Between September and December 2013 I ran a moral philosophical discussion group with some of its community members called 'Thinking About Us' exploring conceptions of choice, responsibility and agency. The group aimed to help these young people to conceptually scaffold a positive sense of their own moral agency. The series in the discussion group I will be relating to was short, only four sessions, and thus no real conclusions can be drawn from its practice. This paper will utilize the perspectives of these young people on moral agency, as gained from these discussions, in an exploration of the ways in which Western



societal attitudes towards childhood and mental health unjustly exclude this population from membership in the moral community.

Above are the words of a Baobab community member illustrating the extreme difficulties some experience in their decision-making. Many of the Baobab population need support in building their confidence as moral agents; as capable of appropriate judgment and accountability. Many in this population have had the development of their psychological sense of moral agency disrupted by their childhood experiences. Their confidence in their abilities to make decisions will often have been undermined, but this does not mean that they are incapable of moral judgment and accountability. My claim will centre on theoretical and attitudinal denials of their capabilities as moral agents, which frustrate the possibility of recovery from the developmental disruptions they have experienced.

This paper will seek to show that attitudes towards childhood and mental health that lead to failures to recognize this population as members of the moral community are recognitionally unjust. There are a number of widely held conceptions within British society (and arguably Western societies in general) relating to childhood and mental health that result in such failures of recognition. My claim will be that these failures are unjust in relation to Axel Honneth's model of recognitional justice. I will argue that by not being recognized as moral agents, in a basic sense of the term, they are not recognized as belonging to the moral community. And this failure of recognition impedes these young people's efforts to rebuild their lives.

To these ends I will first give an introduction to the Baobab population and the discussion group, following which I will outline the theoretical underpinnings of my claim in relation to moral agency and recognitional justice. I will then address four conceptual roots of the denial of moral agency to this population in relation to childhood and mental health. These conceptions do not exist in a vacuum; they are in relationship with societal attitudes, attitudes that when held by those they interact with (especially figures of authority) form a distinct barrier from intersubjective recognition as moral agents for these young people. This failure of recognition harms their abilities to develop a positive sense of their own moral agency.

## 1. The Baobab population

The members of the Baobab Centre are young refugees and asylum seekers; people who arrived in the UK under the age of 18 who have had their childhoods disrupted or taken away by political or organized violence in their home countries. Almost all have experienced multiple and severe traumas and separations. Almost all have experienced extreme violence, including sexual violence, whether as victims, perpetrators (a number are former child soldiers) or witnesses: A minority arrived in the UK with parents or other family members who have limited capacities to parent them, most arrived unaccompanied.

Many had traumatic journeys to the UK, some were trafficked for domestic and sexual slavery, and some had travelled great distances in dangerous conditions, sometimes losing loved ones on the way. All have struggled since arriving in the UK, most have experienced further trauma at the hands of the British government and asylum system. Their stories and ages are often not believed by those in authority such as clinicians and government agencies (Kirmayer, 2007, Kvittingen, 2010). Many have been in detention, threatened with deportation and experienced periods of complete destitution.

All this of course is likely to take a heavy psychological toll. In an evaluation of the Baobab Centre (2013), from the sample of the population evaluated, levels of depression and anxiety were very high and a significantly high percentage self harmed. Their waking and sleeping lives are disrupted by worry. In terms of social life, issues around responsibility and social relationships feature very strongly in this population. Many reported problems with close relationships, lacked satisfactory relationships and struggled with responsibility. When asked about their wishes for the future, the ability to be responsible in close personal relationships, in relation to themselves, and especially for a child, came up repeatedly. One wished to "*learn to forgive myself*". The population were found to be "very prone to self blame when they were not to blame"(ibid)<sup>2</sup>.

## 2. The discussion group

The aim of the discussion group, as part of the Baobab Centre's holistic and community based approach, was to provide a space in which participants could engage with the complexities of ideas of responsibility, and specifically of moral agency, independent

from their personal narratives and their associated difficult feelings. Each session began and ended with a question:

1. What is it to be human?
2. What do we need in order to be able to make a choice?
3. How do our emotions and rational cognition feature in our decision-making?
4. What is the difference between an adult and a child?

These questions aimed at building a picture of moral agency from their perspectives; a picture capable of taking in the complexities of their experiences. All of the central questions asked led to lively and engaged debate. The young people were impressive in their abilities to articulate their positions, probe the positions of others, and present problems.

I wanted to help participants to gain a positive sense of their own moral agency. But even if such a project could be effective in this aim, societal attitudes excluding these young people from moral agency would be likely to undermine its positive effects. There are common attitudes in British society that relate to these young people as 'damaged' and thus incapable of moral agency. This intersubjectively affects their self-concepts. Without shifts in the societal conceptions that underpin these attitudes, projects such as 'Thinking About Us' will be fighting an uphill battle.

### 3. Moral agency

The issues around self-blame and struggles with responsibility that are so prominent in this population can be seen to stem from negative self-concepts in relation to agency, particularly moral agency. Moral agency, in its basic sense, as the ability to make moral judgments and be held accountable for them, is commonly seen as an essential aspect of humanity. It is essential to recognition as part of the moral community. It is in this basic sense that I will argue that moral agency fails to be recognized in these young people due to their experiences.

In moral philosophical discourse this basic view of moral agency is simplistic, but my claim revolves around the ways in which these young people are societally denied moral agency in just such a basic sense. Societal attitudes towards them, due to their childhood experiences, fail to recognize their abilities to make moral judgments and

be held accountable for them. Rather than discussing whether or not these young people can normatively be seen as capable of moral agency, I will be focusing on the ways in which societal denials of their capabilities as moral agents affect the positive development of this population's psychological *sense* of moral agency. I will not be delving into the vast philosophical literature on moral agency, except to highlight its theoretical exclusions of this population (e.g. Strawson 1962).

Psychologists Cecilia Wainryb and Monisha Pasupathi have worked extensively on the development of a sense of moral agency amongst such populations. They see the psychological sense of moral agency as the subjective awareness of our own moral capabilities: how we view and experience ourselves as moral agents (Pasupathi and Wainryb, 2010, 55). They describe how the experience of violent trauma in childhood can negatively affect the development of a sense of moral agency. Such experiences can trigger psychological defences that inhibit the ability to attribute a basis in personal goals and beliefs to the morally relevant actions of both ourselves and others: a psychological strategy to protect the psyche from the very difficult emotions that are likely to arise with the perception of intentionally caused severe harm. This inhibits the ability to develop a positive sense of moral agency, as the ability to recognize any moral agency has been inhibited (Wainryb and Pasupathi, 2010). This is just one of many ways in which the development of a sense of moral agency is disrupted by the experience of violent trauma in childhood (cf. Wainryb, 2011; Wainryb and Pasupathi, 2008; 2010; Jones, 2002; Perry, 2001).

Therapeutic efforts, such as those of the Baobab Centre, to help build a positive sense of moral agency in these young people (in order that they may not be '*paralyzed in decisions*') are greatly impeded by societal attitudes that do not recognise them as moral agents due to their childhood experiences. Such societal attitudes intersubjectively impact these young people's sense of self, especially when held by those in authority. Honneth in *The Struggle for Recognition* (1995) sees experiences of violent trauma as "always accompanied by a dramatic breakdown in one's trust in the reliability of the social world and hence a collapse in one's own basic self-confidence." (133) One key aspect of such self-confidence is a positive sense of our own moral agency.

This being said, I absolutely do not want to paint a picture of the Baobab population as incapable of moral agency – that is exactly the kind of characterization of these

young people that I am claiming is unjust. Though they have had the development of their sense of moral agency disrupted by their experiences of violent trauma, they are making great efforts to overcome and recover from the psychological effects of their experiences. The attitudes towards their capabilities as moral agents present in British society are unjust in that they undermine these efforts.

#### 4. Recognitional Justice

My claim of injustice in this paper is based in theories of recognitional justice, particularly as conceptualized in the work of Honneth. Recognitional justice is a concept of social justice deeply rooted in Hegelian ideas of intersubjectivity; a justice that is dialogic, that is relational. Crudely, this means that for us to find positive value in ourselves, that positive value must in some way, at some time have been recognized by others. Our self-concept is formed intersubjectively, not in isolation. And this means that nonrecognition or misrecognition of our personhood can lead us to misrecognize ourselves in harmful ways. Societal blocks to recognition as moral agents harm these young people's efforts to build a positive sense of their capacities for moral agency.

Charles Taylor (1994), in his influential essay 'The Politics of Recognition' states: "Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted and reduced mode of being" (25). Honneth (1995) similarly sees the denial of recognition to represent "an injustice not simply because it harms subjects or restricts their freedom to act, but because it injures them with regard to the positive understanding of themselves that they have acquired intersubjectively." (131) Intersubjective experiences of nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict psychological harm. Societal attitudes that deny the Baobab population moral agency due to their experiences lead to many such intersubjective experiences.

Honneth identifies three types of recognitional injustice, the first of which are those that "affect a person at the level of physical integrity" (132). Violent traumas such as rape and torture are acts of recognitional injustice against a person's 'physical integrity'. Honneth describes such injustices as producing a "feeling of being defencelessly at the mercy of another subject, to the point of feeling that one has been deprived of reality." (132) This is a form injustice that the Baobab population



have experienced, and are now struggling to come to terms with and recover from. The second form of recognitional injustice that Honneth describes is the most appropriate to my present claim. These injustices are in relation to societal rights where individuals are "structurally excluded from the possession of certain rights within a society." (133)

It is understood that rights in this context will often be seen to be synonymous with legal rights. But Honneth also sees social ostracism to act in the same manner (ibid): to 'structurally exclude' individuals from 'certain rights'. Honneth describes such exclusions as leading to "the feeling of not enjoying the status of a fully fledged partner to interaction, equally endowed with moral rights". The experience of such an exclusion "signifies a violation of the intersubjective expectation to be recognized as a subject capable of forming moral judgments" (ibid). Societal attitudes that fail to recognize the Baobab population as moral agents violate such 'intersubjective expectations'. These failures of recognition have harmful psychological consequences.

I do not have the space here to address either Honneth's third form of recognitional injustice or the normative underpinnings of his model. For my present purposes the psychological consequences of these failures of recognition may suffice to show them as detrimental to a broad conception of human flourishing. I am in full agreement with Honneth that psychological harm "endangers the identity of human beings, just as infection with disease endangers their physical life" (135).

Honneth's model of recognitional justice provides a valuable theoretical foundation for my claim. His model additionally suggests the kind of remedy that I would advocate for these injustices. That is, a preventative approach, working towards shifts in social norms that would be able to "protect subjects most extensively from suffering disrespect" (ibid). For Honneth, 'disrespect' is equal to a failure of recognition. In the following sections I will explore some of the conceptual roots of failures to recognize this population's moral agency, and suggest the kinds of societal shifts that could be protective of these young people's already violated psyches. The conceptual roots I will engage with are: 1. Childhood as a period of 'becoming' adults. 2. Ideals of childhood innocence. 3. An individualised rather than social approach to mental health. 4. Theories of moral agency that exclude children and those with mental health diagnoses.

**4.1. Children as 'becoming' adults**

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Children are often theoretically viewed as in a state of 'becoming' adults, and thus 'becoming' agents, rather than 'being' children: 'being' child agents (Archard & Macleod, 2002, 2). This is a view that will often see adults as the inevitable products of their childhoods. Such views obscure the agency of the child, and can lead to causal determinations of the capabilities of the adults they will become. In the present case, such conceptions block those who have had the childhood experiences of the Baobab population from recognition as moral agents, both as children and as adults.

From the ancients to today, theorists who have related to childhood with regard to moral agency often see children as incapable of full membership of the moral community because they conceptualize this process of 'becoming' as a lack. Children are characterized as lacking something that 'normal' adults have. As Archard and Macleod (2002) state: "children are viewed in privative terms for what they are not rather than positively for what they are in themselves. They are seen as 'becoming' rather than 'being'." (2) This conception is particularly problematic for the Baobab population, as their process of 'becoming' has been violently disrupted.

The attribution of moral agency to children, whether they have experienced violent trauma or not is a complex theoretical matter, particularly as childhood, and therefore adulthood, are such contested concepts: if we cannot adequately define a child, how can we theorise about their moral agency? Theorising about childhood and agency brings with it a host of challenges. The dividing line between childhood and adulthood is unclear, and any lines drawn between them for legal reasons, usually determined by age, tend to be unsuitable for less mechanistic purposes. In addition there is a great deal of variety in the ways that childhood is conceptualized historically and culturally, meaning that to define childhood will almost inevitably be culturally and temporally specific, there appears to be no universal concept of the child (cf. Cunningham, 2005).

In one of the discussion group sessions we addressed definitions of adulthood rather than childhood, as childhood is so often related to in terms of not yet being an adult. We noted that adulthood is often defined by age, height, completion of puberty: physiological definitions that do not necessarily reflect a persons stage of psychological development. Some participants talked about Home Office age



assessments they had been through. They thought these assessments were often wrong as they rely on physiological features, ethnocentric developmental markers and do not take into account experiences such as torture (cf. Kvittingen, 2010). They felt that without time spent getting to know a person, and a great deal of expertise, it is almost impossible to assess their age, let alone to decide whether they are an adult or not.

They also brought up examples of people they knew who looked like adults but behaved like children and people who were chronologically children but behaved like adults. In this discussion the central determinant of adult behaviour was the ability to take responsibility, rather than to be held responsible. This definition of adulthood saw the individual's sense of moral accountability, rather than physiological developmental markers, to be key. Through this lens childhood can still be seen to be a process of 'becoming', but this is a kind of 'becoming' that bears no relation to chronological age and can therefore be seen as a lifelong pursuit, not one limited to childhood.

When such a process of 'becoming' is limited to childhood, this leads us to see adults as the products of their childhoods. The prevalence of such ideas in British society means that these young people will inevitably be fighting battles to be viewed as 'normal' adults due to their 'abnormal' childhoods. Alexander Bagattini (2014) discusses this idea of childhood as a process towards adulthood in relation to well-being and sees that if child well-being is reduced "to the process of becoming a normally or well-functioning adult...we overlook the perspective of the child in a substantial way" (175). We also limit the potential of the adults they will become. If the process of becoming 'normal' or 'well-functioning' is limited to a physiologically defined childhood, those who have had this process disrupted in the ways that the Baobab population have can appear barred from becoming 'normal' or 'well-functioning'. Their perspectives both as children and as the perceived adult products of their childhoods are then likely to be overlooked.

I do not want to engage here with the question of whether and how a child might be capable of being regarded as a moral agent in a normative sense (cf. Bagattini and Macleod, 2015; Archard and Macleod, 2002). I hope rather that I have begun to expose how limiting our 'becoming' to childhood can affect those who have had their childhood disrupted by extreme violent trauma: how such views can affect their societal recognition as moral agents and thus be unjust. A preventative remedy for

such injustice might involve a shift in societal attitudes towards a view that sees both children and adults as in a continuing process of 'becoming', a process that will move back and forth along a spectrum of non-functioning to well-functioning throughout life. Such a shift could prevent difficult experiences in childhood from harming its survivors further. Additional examples of the damage caused by views of adults as the products of their childhoods will appear in the following sections.

#### **4.2. *Childhood innocence***

The second problematic conception of childhood that I am addressing is that of childhood innocence. A conception that is hard to reconcile with experiences of political and organized violence. The ideal of childhood innocence in Western society is a fairly recent phenomenon, although it is now widespread (Rosen, 2013). Seeing childhood as a time of innocence makes it difficult to reconcile experiences of extreme violent trauma with childhood. This can lead to denials of agency in order to protect an imagined ideal. Though this ideal is critically engaged with in much of the recent literature on childhood (cf. Cunningham 2005), many of the adults these young people encounter in British society have not engaged critically with the ways in which such ideals affect their relating to this population. Here I will outline how this can lead to a failure to recognize these young people's views of themselves as moral agents.

The attempt to reconcile childhood innocence with violent trauma can result in entirely ignoring the perspective of the child in favour of characterizations that protect this ideal. Adults from societies that have not experienced violence in the way that the Baobab population have will often see such experiences as catastrophic and want to protect their ideals of childhood from such catastrophe. This results in characterizations of children who have experienced violence (especially as perpetrators) either as innocents who are not to blame (they are told they are not accountable) or as damaged monsters (no longer innocent and thus so damaged that they are incapable of moral judgment). Both characterizations fail to recognise the moral agency of those they characterize. They block the ability to engage with the voices of these young people and to recognize them as persons. Persons independent of an ideal that they cannot fully embody due to their experiences. This is harmful to young people already deeply mired in extreme difficulties with their own sense of moral agency.

The participants of the discussion group did, on the whole, see children as not responsible for their actions in the way that adults are, but they did not see children as innocents. They did see themselves as carrying problems in decision-making, especially moral decision-making, due to their experiences. Some had a very limited sense of their own moral agency, but this did not mean that they released themselves from culpability. They did not feel they could always control their actions, but that did not release them from responsibility from those actions. As the Centre's evaluation found, they were "very prone to self blame when they were not to blame." (Baobab Centre, 2013, 3).

This population have experienced severe limitations to their abilities to make choices, they have been forced, coerced, detained and unable to exert control over their circumstances, unable to protect loved ones, unable to protect themselves. Many have waited years for their asylum cases to be resolved and thus forced to live in a prolonged state of uncertainty and lack of control that is very difficult to bear. But they do not take themselves off the hook due to their experiences; they seem instead to find themselves more culpable, perhaps culpable for things they did not do, as they are not always able to be clear about what they do and do not have control over<sup>3</sup>. Societal characterizations of people who have had this populations childhood experiences exacerbate such confusion as these characterizations deny any agency they may have seen themselves to have.

Anthropologist David Rosen (2013) vividly portrays such characterizations in relation to child soldiers. He describes a fundamental tension between a highly idealized concept of childhood and the realities of child soldiers' experiences. Tensions which lead to these children being seen as "agents of terror" acting on behalf of corrupting and morally culpable adults (99), "ticking time-bombs" once they have been demobilised (107) and "autonomous robots" (108). The language describing child soldiers from Rosen's research is starkly dehumanizing, characterizing them as empty vessels manipulated by adults. The implication is that they have been so manipulated and damaged that they cannot understand the moral norms they are breaking; they are incapable of moral judgment.

Similar, although less extreme, characterizations are often applied to all children who have experienced political and organized violence. This goes hand in hand with the issues raised in the previous section. Ideals of childhood innocence, in

combination with conceptions of the child as in a state of 'becoming' leads to their trauma being imagined to mutilate the innocent childhood that is thought to enable development into 'normal' adults (cf. Perry, 2001; Cairns & Dawes, 1996; Rosen, 2013). These are characterizations that are not only mostly unfounded, or at least enormously oversimplified (Cairns & Dawes, 1996, Kostelny, 2006), they are also damaging to those they characterize, particularly to their abilities to see themselves as moral agents. As Wainryb and Pasupathi state in relation to the development of a positive sense of moral agency in child soldiers: "they need to end up with a sense that they *are* moral agents (and were moral agents even when they engaged in violence)" (2008, 185)

Another characterization that affects these young people's recognition as moral agents is that of blamelessness. This attribution of blamelessness is very common and understandable. An almost automatic adult response to young people who have experienced violence, whether political, organized or familial, is to say something along the lines of 'it wasn't your fault' (Rosen, 2013, 102; Wainryb & Pasupathi 2008, 185). They are told they were forced, had no choice, or did not understand that there were any other options available. These things will necessarily be at least partially true. However, this is often not what these young people want or need to hear, it denies any agency they see themselves to have, it can prevent their voices being heard in conversations about their feelings of moral culpability.

In the discussion group we explored what we need in order to be able to make choices. We asked whether this could be defined negatively, limited to the environmental options available to us, or whether there was more to our choice making. There were a number of participants who fixated on the limitations of our abilities to choose by external forces: one participant talked about being in a cage, having no choice except choices defined by captors, linking this to his time in detention. But by the end they all agreed that ultimately, their choices are their own, their own in varied and complex ways. Even the participant who felt stuck in a cage said that what he really needed to be able to choose, in this case to be capable of moral judgment, was "*knowing your inner self, strength...it will lead you to decide is it the right thing or the wrong thing.*" Another participant stated that she didn't yet have the inner strength to make such decisions unsupported. As well as silencing their voices, characterizations that deny moral agency to these young people intersubjectively reduce the potential for a sense of inner strength with regard to moral judgment.

Ideals of childhood innocence make it complex to tell the story of a child that includes agency, particularly moral agency, in the context of political and organized violence. But this is a complex story that needs to be told. A denial of these complexities is recognitionally unjust; it intersubjectively affects the ability to develop a positive sense of moral agency. As Wainryb and Pasupathi put it: "The best stories will be the complicated, full ones, those that encompass where the children started and where they have been" (2008, 187) Wider societal critique of the ideal of childhood innocence and its implications, especially amongst those working with these populations, could begin to remedy such injustices.

### **4.3. Individualized mental health approaches**

When the conceptions of childhood discussed in the previous sections are combined with mainstream mental health approaches to the effects of violent trauma, we see further blocks to the recognition of the members of the Baobab community as moral agents. In a society in which the psychological effects of war and violent trauma are seen to produce conditions in individuals that place them outside the 'norm', its survivors are often not attributed 'normal' psychological, social and moral functioning. This individualized approach ignores the distinctly social contexts in which the violent trauma took place and locates the problem within the individual, a heavy burden to bear (Summerfield, 1999, 2000).

The pathologizing or medicalizing of the psychological effects of political and organized violence (Summerfield, 1999, 2000, Kostelny, 2006) defines its survivors as outside the 'norm'. This is not to say that medical approaches cannot be helpful or even necessary in some contexts. But their associated exclusions from the 'norm' can deny survivors a voice; can make others dismiss their views as distorted by emotional damage<sup>4</sup>. Psychiatrist Derek Summerfield, who has worked extensively with adult survivors of political and organized violence in the UK, identifies a key problem with the medicalizing of violent trauma in general, not just in children. He sees the Western medical establishment's view of mental health problems as 'individual-centred' and sees this as unhelpful for these populations (1999, 1453). Refugees and asylum seekers often need medical diagnoses in order to get practical support in Western societies. But there is a risk in such diagnoses, and the models of treatment they initiate, of placing social ills on the shoulders of individuals (Rousseau and Measham, 2007). This is one reason for the Baobab Centre's strong community focus.

In discussing where moral responsibility lies when children carry out harmful acts, the participants of the discussion group raised societal breakdown as a central issue. The claim was made that when a society is dysfunctional, children act in harmful ways, and that children and their parents are blamed to avoid looking at the societal problems at the root of the issue. Some participants responded that societal responsibility was too complex and broad; they felt that parents are responsible for children and therefore they should be held responsible for their children's harmful actions. These respondents understood in a practical sense why it is difficult to see society as responsible rather than individuals, but did not deny societal root causes.

War, political and organized violence, is by its nature social. Trying to analyse the psychological effects of war without taking as primary its social experience (and in this context, its social experience as a child) misses what is truly damaging about such violence by limiting it to individual experiences. The experience of societal breakdown and its psychological consequences are especially damaging for children who are unlikely to have had time to form a robust sense of their own moral agency yet: they can see themselves as individually responsible for their socially produced trauma (Jones 2002).

When we act in ways we perceive as harmful, whether we have in fact caused harm or not, this challenges our sense of moral agency (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010). By the time we are adults, most of us are perfectly capable of constructing narratives around harmful acts that preserve our sense of moral agency. We include other factors that led to the act of harm, or which negate its harm in some way. We can incorporate elements of force or coercion as temporarily limiting our agency, but not taking it away entirely; we can incorporate our own motivations and beliefs and those of others (ibid). This can allow us to be more forgiving of both others and ourselves. But all this requires a level of understanding that these young people often did not have prior to their traumatic experiences.

As these young people have been severed from the social contexts of the violence they experienced, their experiences become a part of them individually, not a part of the social worlds from which this violence erupted. They are not only severed from the social contexts of their traumas through displacement, but also by being told their experiences have medically damaged them as individuals; that they are the containers for the damage this violence has caused. The medicalizing of the psychological effects



of violent trauma in childhood marks survivors as 'damaged' and diagnosed conditions also often include a lack of some of the cognitive requirements associated with the attribution of moral agency. In childhood, such diagnoses are very difficult to see as temporary or separate from a stable self-concept that includes moral agency.

These young people are receiving very confusing and damaging messages: that nothing is their fault, that they have no moral agency, and that their experiences have individually damaged them, made them different from other humans; potentially unfit for membership in the moral community. A more just view might be that many survivors are responding perfectly 'normally' to their experiences of political and organized violence. A more psychosocial rather than individualized approach (Rousseau and Measham, 2007), such as that of the Baobab Centre could enable greater recognition of survivors' voices; recognizing them as persons with experiences to be heard, rather than failing to recognize them as 'normal', persons and thus denying them a voice.

## 5. Theoretical implications

"Regarding people as responsible agents is evidently not just a matter of belief. So regarding them means something in practice." (Watson, 2004, 119)

The societal conceptions discussed in the previous sections are reflected in philosophical discourses relating to moral agency. Many theories of moral agency exclude children and those diagnosed with mental health conditions. Such theoretical conceptions do not occur within a vacuum, they are in constant dialogue with societal attitudes: attitudes that affect the young members of the Baobab community and their abilities to develop a positive sense of moral agency; their abilities to view themselves as competent agents capable of building new lives.

Discussing moral agency, and moral responsibility, with young people who have experienced violent trauma made clear how unjust characterizations of them as incapable of moral judgment and accountability truly are. From these discussions it was eminently clear that they are persons struggling with meaning, identity and morality in the same way as we all are. However, in the hypothetical realms of philosophical theories of moral responsibility, as well as a variety of other moral theoretical realms that rely on hypothetical dilemmas<sup>5</sup>, their perspectives are not often seen, their equal personhood can fail to be recognized.

These discourses could benefit from gaining an understanding of some of the non-hypothetical humans they are describing in order to become aware of unjust misrecognition of their personhood. A case in point is the denial of full humanity through a denial of moral responsibility to those who have had traumatic experiences in childhood present in Strawson's 'Freedom and Resentment' (1962). Strawson advocates what he terms an 'objective attitude' towards children, adults with a variety of mental illnesses and people "peculiarly unfortunate in [their] formative circumstances." (6) This 'objective attitude' involves seeing a person as "an object for social policy" (ibid) and it requires that 'civilized' people relate to these people differently: "though you may light him, you cannot quarrel with him, and though you may talk to him, even negotiate with him, you cannot reason with him." (ibid) Times have changed and attitudes towards mental health today mean that much of the language used here by Strawson would not be so readily used, but the attitude is still very much present. We see it in the use of the 'psychopath' and the 'autist' in moral philosophical literature (e.g. Shoemaker, 2007).

Gary Watson (2004) engages with the problems of Strawson's exclusions from moral responsibility. In relation to the child, Watson interprets Strawson's position, rather than being excluding, to be that children are still "gradually becoming responsible agents" (126), and that perhaps what they still lack is 'moral understanding'. This places his view firmly within problematic conceptions of children as 'becoming' adults discussed previously. Watson sees membership of the moral community as reliant on agents understanding the moral demands placed on them (ibid). But young people such as the discussion group participants mostly do and did understand the moral demands placed on them, they were simply not in positions, for a variety of complex reasons, to fulfil those demands.

In the novel 'Beasts of No Nation' (Iwealea, 2005), a highly accurate portrayal of the experiences of a child soldier in an unnamed African nation. Agu, the protagonist, is depicted as very much aware of the terrible nature of what he is witnessing and doing. He prays for forgiveness, describing the specific acts he needs to be forgiven for and explains to God that he knows that it was right for him to kill a man because he belonged to the same government forces that killed his family. Those still regarded as children, especially by the arbitrary definition of age, will very often have full moral understanding, what they may not have is the same control over their circumstances as an adult. Claims that children lack moral understanding are highly inaccurate, as shown by recent moral development research (cf. Killen & Smetana, 2013).

Watson then brings in the case of Robert Harris, a man who suffered emotional and physical abuse and neglect from birth and was on death row for murdering two youths in cold blood and showing absolutely no remorse. Watson claims that some might argue that: "Harris' history reveals him to be an inevitable product of his formative circumstances. And seeing him as a product is inconsistent with seeing him as a responsible agent." (137) Though using different language this sounds very similar to Strawson's 'objective attitude' and contains the same dehumanization. Watson understands that this is a thoroughly unfair and also false assessment, that people who have survived childhood trauma can do great good, and people who have not had such experiences can act in very harmful ways, but this is not reflected, as he cogently argues, in many theories of moral responsibility.

It is very possible to recover from even extreme and multiple childhood traumas, but one of the main factors in such recovery is a sense of belonging or community (Jones, 2002, Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2008), which could also be termed as societal recognition. If such childhood experiences already theoretically exclude their survivors from full membership of the moral community, this limits their capacities for recovery. Discourses relating to moral agency could do with keeping in mind that they are theorizing real people, real experiences, real futures, and that their theories have real effects, they do not exist in a hypothetical vacuum. Though the field of moral responsibility is broad and contains a vast wealth of perspectives, Strawson provides a highly influential example of how some of its exclusions from the moral community can be recognitionally unjust to those who have had the experiences of the young survivors in the Baobab Community.

## 6. Conclusion

I have claimed that within the frame of recognitional justice, specifically as per Honneth's model, societal attitudes towards childhood and mental health that deny the like of the Baobab population moral agency are unjust. I have highlighted some of the roots of these societal attitudes in conceptions of childhood as a period of 'becoming' an adult, ideals of childhood innocence, individualized rather than social approaches to mental health and theories of moral agency that exclude children and those with mental health difficulties. These societal attitudes have been claimed to be recognitionally unjust in

that they intersubjectively frustrate these young people's efforts to develop a positive sense of moral agency by socially ostracizing them from the moral community.

Remedies for such injustice are not straightforward; they require societal shifts in thinking. In full awareness that such shifts are extremely problematic to initiate or guide, I have suggested the kinds of shifts that could offer preventative remedies for these injustices: first, a shift towards a view of childhood as a positively construed time of 'becoming' on a continuum that lasts a lifetime, rather than a negatively construed time of 'becoming' an adult, a time of lacking adulthood that ends with an adult product; second, a critical engagement with the ideal of childhood innocence and its implications, especially amongst adults working with these populations; third, a favouring of psychosocial approaches to the mental health needs of survivors of political and organized violence over an individualized approach; and finally a greater awareness by moral theorists of the people they are affecting when they define normative exclusions from moral agency. Overall, it would be of benefit to the Baobab population if there were a more widespread critical engagement with the societal attitudes that exclude them from the moral community due to their childhood experiences.

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## Notes

1. Throughout this paper, where I am quoting the words of participants and members of the Baobab Community these quotations will appear in italics.
2. For a discussion of psychotherapeutic work with this population by the Director of the Baobab Centre see Melzak (2009).
3. Taking of responsibility by abused children on behalf of their abusers is routinely seen in work with children who have been sexually abused, see Berliner & Elliott (2002).
4. For more depth on the critique of the denial of moral agency to those with a wide variety of mental health diagnoses see Szasz, 1989.
5. Such as that of moral development theory in psychology, see Wainryb & Pasupathi (2008), Gilligan (1977), Cairns (1996).