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Compromise as a Relation: Social Change, Mobilization of Norms, and Experiences of Loss[1]

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ABSTRACT: What does it mean for social movements to change their self-conception, presentation, demands, goals, or strategies to engage with dominant actors, institutions, or publics? This is a question I was faced with when doing trans rights advocacy work in an institutional setting as an extra-institutional actor in Estonia. In social movement studies and activist literature, such dynamics are often described and analyzed, condemned or commended, as "compromises." However, less attention has been paid to clarifying conceptually what kind of compromise this is. Tracing my lived experience as a trans rights advocate through autotheory and bridging social movement studies with political theory, I develop the notion "compromise as a relation" to make sense of compromises that are neither interpersonal settlements nor intrapersonal trade-offs, but a way of orienting oneself toward others under constraint. Following critical phenomenology, I argue that such compromises are constituted by both experiential and structural features: first, by an uncertain misalignment between the desirable change and the potentially achievable change, and second, by sociopolitical conditions characterized by perceived opportunities for change on the one hand and restrictions on the other.

KEYWORDS: Autotheory, compromise, critical phenomenology, trans rights movement, powercube

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1. Introduction

From the autumn of 2021 until the summer of 2022, I communicated and participated in meetings with representatives of the Ministry of Social Affairs of Estonia and the specialized medical committee tasked with assessing transgender people applying for legal gender recognition and gender transition-related medical care.[2] The context of my advocacy work was that the Ministry was changing the composition of the medical committee. As part of this change, the parties were rethinking the gender assessment process and included civil society actors at the table, including me. The main point of contention that emerged between the medical assessment committee and me was the psychiatric evaluation as a prerequisite for accessing transition-related care and legal recognition. My position was and is that compulsory psychiatric assessment psychopathologizes gender variance, violates trans people's right to privacy, and creates barriers to necessary services (see also Ashley, Parsa, kus, and MacKinnon 2024). However, this was not the position I ultimately advocated. Instead, I proposed a shorter assessment period, a more transparent assessment process, and a publicly available list of competent assessment providers. Even though I was against the psychiatric prescreening requirement, I found myself advocating for its reform. Intuitively, my willingness to participate in a discussion about a procedure I viewed as unnecessary, stigmatizing, and harmful had something to do with power. It was as if I were playing by rules that were never directly communicated or agreed upon, but that made some actions and demands more possible than others. Put differently, the decision to advocate for a reform was, on the one hand, my own: I was not coerced, forced, dominated, manipulated, or controlled. On the other hand, even though power was not exercised directly over me, my choices were structured by some exercise of power. I willingly advocated for a goal that was not aligned with my principles or my community's desires and needs. In other words, the decision was and was not my own.

I am taking up my experience as an object of reflection and analysis, as the situation I found myself in is unique to neither me nor the broader trans rights cause. Both activist and scholarly literature note that unequal power relationships, dominant social norms, and institutional practices can shape the goals and strategies of social movements. For instance, research on nonhuman animal advocacy shows that activists and advocates must balance their ideals and the established social and institutional norms to be eligible for institutional resources, such as funding (Wrenn 2019, 40–42), and for gaining public intelligibility, recognition, and support (Jacobsson and Lindblom 2016), resulting in making decisions activists and advocates themselves may disagree with (Aavik 2018; Cherry 2016, chap. 7). In other words, "asking something other than what you really want" (Leenaert 2017, 30) is widespread in different social and political causes.

The central concept I work with to describe and analyze this dynamic is *compromise*. I argue that its conceptual framework—developed primarily in political theory—helps to elucidate both the intrapersonal or subjective tensions activists and advocates may experience when advocating for a goal or using methods they find ethically and/or politically fraught, as well as the social, political, and cultural context that necessitates and shapes compromise decisions and experiences. I agree with Houde-Tremblay, Cloutier, McClintock, Audet, and Olivier that attending to compromises reveals "what matters to people […] but what is not necessarily easy to embody in the here and now" (2023, 976). Studying compromises reveals the interactional relationship between the actor and their context, helping to "identify motivations behind ambiguous tactics that we might otherwise simply classify as the internalization and reproduction of neoliberal logics and as co-optation" (Houde-Tremblay *et al*. 2023, 987).

[2] Legal gender recognition (or sex reclassification) refers to how individuals can change their legal gender status in the civil status register and on their identity documents. Estonia does not recognize nonbinary genders and classifies its citizens and residents as either male or female. Gender transition-related medical care refers to a range of medical and surgical services people may pursue when transitioning, e.g., hormone replacement therapy.

This paper centers on one particular form of compromise in social movement practice, which I consider one of the central ones. These are the compromises activists and advocates make when gauging how to engage with, appeal to, or address policymakers, public institutions, private interests, potential funding bodies, or even the general public, seeking alignment between their goals, principles, or values and perceived opportunities for change. These compromises can involve giving up something of value to make yourself or your demands intelligible, reasonable, or justified in the eyes of those to whom you appeal. This should be contrasted with compromises that occur when power-holders respond to movement demands piecemeal, for example, through a policy reform (see, e.g., Evans 2016). The sense of compromise I focus on occurs before or without such a response, as a result of which it often remains invisible. To account for these decisions and experiences as compromises, grounded in both my personal experience as a trans rights advocate and the social movement studies literature, I will put forward a conception of compromise as a *relation to* or an *orientation toward* particular others, social structures, or the world more broadly construed.

To that end, in the second section, I explain how the subsequent analysis and discussion are developed through autotheory and critical phenomenology. From there, I review the social movement studies literature on compromise as a relation, showing that while the dynamic I describe has been documented empirically and normatively, its conceptual characteristics have remained underdeveloped or overshadowed by broader themes. Because the notion of relation is central to both developing such a conceptual understanding of compromise and to political theoretical accounts of compromise, I turn to political theory in the fourth section. While established political theoretical notions of interpersonal and intrapersonal compromise provide resources for understanding how compromise is often enacted and experienced in social movement practice, social movement practice in turn highlights how political theorists have paid insufficient attention to compromises made in relation to others under considerable constraint. In the fifth section, I return to my lived experience, showing how compromise as a relation is constituted first by an uncertain misalignment between the desirable change and the potentially achievable change, and second by sociopolitical conditions characterized by perceived opportunities for change on the one hand and restrictions on the other. I conclude by discussing the relationship between the mobilization of norms and the experience of loss.

2. Notes on Methodology: Autotheory and Critical Phenomenology

Taking up my first-person experience as the site of investigation, this paper constitutes a particular form of autotheory—processing the personal through theoretical discussion and using it as the ground for theorizing. Lauren Fournier (2021, 24) notes that although autotheory began attracting wider scholarly and public attention with the publication of Maggie Nelson's *Argonauts* (2015), Stacey Young arguably coined the adjective "autotheoretical" as early as 1997. Young (1997, chap. 3) used the adjective to describe a genre of writing that emerged from the US women's movement in the 1980s and drew on personal experience as well as more traditional scholarly apparatus of citation and sustained analysis and critique. Though seemingly novel, the conviction that "the personal is theoretical" (Ahmed 2017, 10) has had a long and prominent history in feminist activism and theory.

According to Young, autotheoretical texts are characterized by substance, form, and methodology "of moving back and forth between the lived life and the social structure, and assessing the impact of each on the other" (1997, 68). While the autobiographical clarifies the origins and situatedness of the author's insights, its synthesis with theoretical reflection "present[s] the lives they chronicle as deeply enmeshed in other lives, and in history, in power relations that operate on multiple levels simultaneously" (Young 1997, 69). These texts focus on the construction of subjectivity and agency as situated within particular social relations and political systems, theorizing both the experience of oppression and possibilities for resistance (Young 1997, 97–98).

In addition to feminist autotheoretical practice, my approach to lived experience—and, hence, to compromise—is guided and shaped by the burgeoning field of critical phenomenology (Mann 2018; Guenther 2021; Oksala 2023). Critical phenomenology's dual attention to what a particular experience is like and how its social, political, and legal conditions structure it works particularly well with autotheory's commitment to blend the personal with theoretical. Similar to autotheoretical approaches, critical phenomenology is characterized by a "methodological and ethical commitment to attend to the ways that power and history shape lived experience" (Guenther 2021, 6) and to how "power and institutions produce subject-positions and possibilities of action but they also manifest themselves in the lived experiences of these subjects" (Loidolt 2021, 162).

A case could be made that critical phenomenology already engages in autotheory, considering it

> offers a rich and insightful method for paying rigorous attention to lived experience in relation to social structures and in the context of an archive, without reducing the alterity, singularity, and complex relationality of experience to these structures (Guenther 2021, 14).

However, while some works sit in both traditions—arguably, Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) contains elements of both—attention to embodied, concrete lived experience does not equate to personal or autobiographical. Rather, as a "hybrid method," both philosophical and qualitative work in critical phenomenology draws on an archive of "third-person accounts and second-person encounters" (Guenther 2021, 11). Works that explicitly engage the autobiographical are much rarer. Yet, given autotheory's methodological commitment to move beyond the autobiographical—to deepen and broaden individual introspection through an archive of theoretical and personal accounts of others—there is a promising compatibility between the two modes of investigation.

As a result, I investigate my lived experience of compromise by adhering to the commitment, shared by both approaches, to attend to the relationality between individual experience and social structures.[3] By adopting the methodological hybridity of both autotheory and critical phenomenology, I complement thinking about the relationality of the personal to the structural with other disciplinary tools. Thinking with power in mind, I investigate the subjective experience of compromise through Judith Butler's understanding of agency and subjectivity as relational phenomena. To explore the situated aspects of that experience, I turn to John Gaventa's "powercube" framework, which offers a multifaceted resource for understanding how power is expressed in civil engagement. However, I first situate my contribution in both social movement studies and political theory.

3. Compromise as a Relation in Social Movement Practice

As noted at the outset, compromise is ubiquitous in both social movement practice and scholarship. However, explicit analyses or discussions of compromise in political organizing remain relatively rare and recent. Compromise is often addressed indirectly, as embedded within broader debates. For example, compromise figures in discussions of incremental policy reform (Evans 2016), arena creation (Elliott-Negri, Jabola-Carolus, Jasper, Mahlbacher, Weisskircher, and Zhelnina 2021), institutionalization and NGOization of social movements (Choudry and Kapoor 2013; Barone 2026), institutional activism (Schmitt and Martin 1999), contradictions between movement ideals and practice (Cherry 2016; Aavik 2018), inter-movement solidarity and cooperation (Gupta and Pearce 2024), and movements' engagements with state institutions (Krieger, Pozzebon, and Gonzalez 2021), capitalist markets (Chasin 2000), scientific or medical institutions (Evans 2023), and private corporations (Garcés 2019).

[3] Reconstructing this experience, I am relying on notes I took during and after the meetings, email exchanges, and my memory. When I was doing the work, I had no intention of using it for research.

One of the earliest studies to center compromise explicitly in social movement research is Jonathan Lange's (1990) analysis of the radical environmental group Earth First!, whose slogan—"No compromise in defense of Mother Earth"—is especially apt. Lange examines how Earth First! deals with "the radical's paradox" (Branham and Pearce 1985, 23–24). The paradox captures a dilemma: expressing radical demands in uncompromising terms risks dismissal as unrealistic or irrational, while expressing them through institutionalized means risks legitimizing the challenged order. Lange argues that Earth First! responds to this paradox by withdrawing from sanctioned forms of political participation, engaging instead in practices that reject dominant norms of rationality and respectability (1990, 479–85). Although appearing ineffective or even alienating, Lange contends that Earth First!'s refusal to compromise is a coherent strategy for avoiding the reinforcement of arrangements they consider ecologically destructive. Crucially, Lange's analysis exploits the double meaning of compromise: cooperation or agreement between conflicting parties and trading principles for material gain or emotional relief (1990, 474–75). Given deep power asymmetries between environmental movements and state or corporate powers, for Earth First!, compromise in the second sense—sacrificing principles—becomes an unjustified precondition for compromise in the first sense—negotiation or cooperation with powerholders.

Subsequent scholarship echoes this understanding. Nico Miskow Friborg (2023), for instance, uses "compromise" to describe strategies in the Danish trans rights movement that prioritize effectiveness at the expense of intersectionally marginalized communities. Similarly, in Corey Wrenn's (2019) analysis of factionalism in the Anglosphere animal rights movement, "compromise" denotes tactics designed to maximize public appeal but trade the ultimate goal of animal liberation for reducing animal suffering. While these studies do not center on compromise analytically, they share a concern with how compromises can already manifest in the translation of ethical and political commitments to concrete strategies.

More recently, social movement scholars have also advanced accounts that approve of compromise. Dereniowska and Matzke (2018), analyzing Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front, argue that "no compromise" positions undermine coalition-building, public support, and democratic legitimacy. In a similar vein, normative theorizing within the degrowth literature suggests that under certain conditions, cooperation and compromise with the state or other political actors can yield transformative outcomes (Bärnthaler 2024; Feola 2025). Empirical studies on agroecology have argued that funding or scaling up grassroots projects through cooperation with governments or engagement with neoliberal markets may indeed compromise the movement's anti-capitalist principles, but also hold transformative promise—a tension captured in the notion of "prefigurative compromise" (Logan 2021; Houde-Tremblay et al. 2023). Given that compromise promises social change while carrying real risks for maintaining, if not reinforcing, the status quo, researchers have also proposed conditions for evaluating its acceptability (Wilson 2008; Schmid and Taylor Aiken 2023; Bärnthaler 2024; Feola 2025). Jennifer Wilson (2008), for example, distinguishes between "horizontal" compromises, which affect movement constituencies relatively equally, and "vertical" compromises, which advance the interests of some groups at the expense of others—framing only the former as potentially acceptable.

Drawing on Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) pragmatic sociology, compromise has also been conceptualized as an effort to reconcile conflicting values or logics. Krieger, Pozzebon, and Gonzalez (2021) show how Brazilian urban movements foreground civic values to cooperate with the state without relinquishing a transformative vision of the right to the city. Malafaia and Meriluoto (2024) examine how climate and mental health activists negotiate tensions between their civic commitments and the depoliticizing and marketizing logics of social media. Whelan and Gond (2017), analyzing animal rights campaigns, argue that radical change can be advanced through value alignment (focusing on the financial and ecological unsustainability of animal agriculture) rather than value compromises (focusing on animal welfare, as opposed to rights)—though alignment strategies may also be experienced as compromises, given they neglect animal suffering (Spang 2025b).

Taken together, this literature suggests that for various social movements, compromise means a politically and ethically fraught relation with others—typically, though not exclusively, with dominant actors, institutions, logics, or publics—in which movements change aspects of their goals, demands, strategies, or self-conception and presentation for some potential gain. While the literature surveyed above has documented this dynamic empirically and normatively, the concept of compromise undergirding these accounts has remained underdeveloped or overshadowed by broader dynamics. I therefore turn to political theory for conceptual resources for understanding compromise as a relation, before returning to the experience that opened this paper.

4. Situating Compromise Between the Intra- and Interpersonal

Interest in the concept and practice of compromise has been both deep and sustained in political theory.[4] One central debate in this literature concerns whether compromise occurs between different parties, within each party, or both. Current research centers on "interpersonal compromise," a compromise between two or more conflicting parties (Rostbøll and Scavenius 2018b, 4). Simon May's succinct definition captures the dominant view, characterizing compromise as: "(i) a collective action concept involving (ii) support for an inferior position motivated by (iii) the presence of disagreement between parties" (2011, 583). On this account, compromise is both the agreement-seeking process and its outcome—a settlement that resolves or suspends disagreement (Golding 1979; Benjamin 1990; Weinstock 2018). Interpersonal compromise is typically distinguished from consensus by the presence of concessions. The parties accept an outcome that is less than desirable from their respective perspectives, experiencing both gains and losses. Many theorists argue that these concessions must be mutual and voluntary for an agreement to count as a compromise (Golding 1979; Lepora 2012; Jones and O'Flynn 2013; Rouméas 2021), though some allow for cases in which only one party concedes (Kirshner 2018), even if treated as non-standard (May 2011).

In addition to the interpersonal sense, compromise has been theorized—albeit with considerably less attention—as something individual actors do. This line of theorizing can focus on compromises that occur outside interpersonal relations, such as Martin Benjamin's notion of "internal" compromise, in which individuals resolve "competing values, principles, and desires" (1990, 20) within themselves, without the involvement of others. However, "internal compromises" can also occur in interpersonal conflicts and compromise agreements. Chiara Lepora's (2012) "intrapersonal compromise" has been most influential in that regard. Lepora understands intrapersonal compromise as a compromise "we are involved in when adjudicating among our own conflicting values" (2012, 2). While Lepora treats intrapersonal compromise as necessitated by an interpersonal conflict and a subsequent compromise agreement, Friderike Spang broadens it to include all situations of "inner conflict between principles or goals that are irreconcilable from a single person's perspective" (2025a, 107).

Importantly, accounts that attend to the intrapersonal dimension offer a phenomenological contribution to the study of compromise. They illuminate why compromises tend to generate feelings of complicity (Lepora and Goodin 2013), moral regret (Córdoba 2013), loss (Cohen 2018), and betrayal (Benjamin 1990), even if compromising may be "the right thing to do on balance" (Lepora 2012, 12).[5] Lepora argues that such feelings derive from the fact that we acquire responsibilities for the other party's perceived wrongdoings we are either "causing, permitting or enabling" (2012, 16). Through compromise, we become at least temporarily and

[4] For an overview of compromise in political theory, see Pennock and Chapman (1979), Fumurescu (2013), Knight (2018), Rostbøll and Scavenius (2018a), and Spang (2023).

[5] Scholarship on Paul Ricœur attempts to divert this near-exclusive focus on negative aspects of becoming intertwined with another by attending to other relational dispositions compromise may engender, such as: forgiveness, recognition, openness, and reciprocity (Assayag-Gillot 2018; Deweer 2022).

partially intertwined with the other party or parties to such an extent that actions external to us become, in a sense, our own. From an intrapersonal perspective, compromise is imagined not only as an external transaction that autonomous agents enter into, but as a process that may transgress into our self-understanding, not to mention our relational ties to those with whom we feel kinship and to whom we are accountable.[6]

Now, how do these accounts clarify compromise as a relation in social movement practice? Do they help illuminate what is going on in situations like the one I found myself in when advocating for trans rights? To start, interpersonal compromise seems ill-equipped to make sense of compromises that occur before, outside of, without, or that exceed explicit negotiations between multiple parties. Further, some political theorists hold that compromise is essentially an inter-party matter and that other uses of the term are "derivative" (May 2011, 583) or "figurative and parasitic" (Jones and O'Flynn 2013, 118). This does not track with the heterogeneity in how people use the term and ignores its operationalizations in fields beyond political theory, such as social movement studies. Instead, I agree with Spang, who argues that "[i]f we limit our understanding and usage of compromise […] to the inter-personal case, we significantly reduce its descriptive potential" (2025a, 118).

While phenomenologically illuminating, I also find it dissatisfying to account for my situation as an intrapersonal compromise. It risks treating the power relations, social norms, and institutional practices that necessitated and shaped the compromise as either irrelevant or secondary to the analysis. Accounts of intrapersonal compromises tend to situate compromising within an individual party, either without the others' involvement or in compromise with others. These accounts also use the language of conflicting values, principles, interests, or goals to describe and define a particular decision or experience as a compromise. While in my case the compromise was not made *with* health care providers and ministry officials, it was necessitated, shaped, and made meaningful by a conflict with them. While an important dimension of this compromise is an inner conflict, what seems equally important is that I had a goal for which I needed the support of others, but those others did not agree or only partially agreed with me. At the center of this sense of compromise are both conflicting principles within a single party and conflicts and disagreements with others, even as the resulting losses and gains are not explicitly agreed upon or even discussed with those others. As a result, the notion of compromise as a relation seems to be situated between intrapersonal and interpersonal accounts of compromise.

Amy Cohen's (2018) work offers a way to conceptualize this sense of between by framing compromise not primarily as a negotiation, agreement, or decision but as an analytical category for making sense of experiences of loss in negotiations. Cohen distinguishes between "compromise shaped by principles," in which loss is experienced as chosen and justified, and "compromise shaped by constraints," in which actors are structurally compelled to revise their claims to make their interests, needs, or values representable in the first place (2018, 102). The latter compromises are negotiated within or among affected parties before a negotiation even begins and might remain invisible to other parties. They are neither purely intrapersonal nor properly interpersonal. Rather, they are relationally produced through unequal power relationships.

Cohen's conclusion that power inequalities, institutional practices, and dominant sociocultural norms may shape what can be demanded or even imagined as viable comes with methodological implications. As Cohen puts it:

> Perhaps an eye on compromise would invite analysis of background distributional rules and conditions that inform negotiating with state and corporate power when one's entire way of life and livelihood are at stake—

[6] Anton Ford (2018) has eloquently argued that compromise is not a bipolar, but a tripolar relation, affecting not only compromisers, but also various "third parties."

> including whether parties should seek to change or even break these background rules and thus whether any form of interest representation is desirable at all. (Cohen 2018, 133)

Compromise, on this view, is not simply something actors choose to do, but something they are implicated in through the interaction between lived experience and background conditions that legitimize some forms of representation while negating others.

With his theoretical framework integrating the interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions of compromise, Patrick Overeem calls for empirical studies on the "phenomenology of compromise making" (2025, 1253). The framework is instructive. By accommodating both dimensions, it allows describing compromise experience as a "complicated double balancing act of agreeing and disagreeing" (Overeem 2025, 1253.). And yet, because it centers on compromises made with others, compromises made under considerable constraint in relation to others fall through its cracks. As a result, inspired by Cohen's insights, I propose a shift toward a critical phenomenology of compromise. Critical phenomenology's dual attention to both lived experience and its social and political context has the advantage of illuminating the affective and moral dimensions of compromising without bracketing the social and political conditions that necessitate and shape these experiences. Methodologically, this means approaching compromise not as an internal decision or collective agreement, but as an (oft-asymmetrical) orientation or relation toward others that can reshape political subjectivity and agency in ways that may engender loss, even as it also promises gains, such as effectiveness.

5. Toward a Critical Phenomenology of Compromise Making

In early 2021, the specialized medical committee, convened by the Ministry of Social Affairs 21 years earlier to assess individuals applying for legal gender recognition and transition-related medical care in Estonia, disbanded. While the context of this decision, including potential disagreements the committee had with the ministry, remains unclear, it left many in the Estonian trans community without access to necessary services until February 2022, when the new committee composition became operational. In September 2021, as a researcher, a trans community organizer, and someone who had undergone the evaluation with the committee years earlier, the Estonian LGBT Association invited me to participate in a meeting the ministry was organizing to review and agree on the gender evaluation process. It included representatives from the ministry, the medical assessment committee, the public health insurance fund, two larger public hospitals, and the Estonian LGBT Association.

As noted at the outset, the main point of contention that emerged between the Estonian LGBT Association and the medical assessment committee was the psychiatric evaluation as a prerequisite for accessing transition-related care and legal recognition. We were not prepared for this particular conflict. The ministerial decree, which regulated the evaluation process at the time, required a "psychiatrist's decision which precludes that the gender reassignment request is caused by a mental disorder" (Common Requirements 1999). However, in the past, a psychiatrist made this decision during the meeting with the committee, not something the person had to obtain beforehand through a potentially lengthy evaluation process. Further, the psychiatric evaluation request broadened the scope of the provision from precluding a causative relationship between "a mental disorder" and "gender reassignment request" to evaluating a person's mental eligibility and readiness to transition. The broadened scope lengthened already extended waiting times and introduced new uncertainties for people undergoing the assessment—what exactly is being evaluated, how, by whom, and for how long—resulting in loss of agency, as explored in depth in the UK by Ruth Pearce (2018).

After the meeting, we contested the psychiatric evaluation requirement in writing and requested another meeting with the committee. Following further discussion with health care providers and ministry officials, it became clear that they were unwilling to review the requirement. Lacking negotiating power and reading the

frustration committee members expressed, both in the room and in written correspondence, I felt further contestation would likely be fruitless and could result in losing access to the ministry and the committee. I came upon an impasse and became stuck. Yet I was also pressed by concern for people who had to undergo the evaluation to access life-affirming services—many of whom I was in direct contact with. While it felt wrong to ask for something less than I perceived trans people deserved, it felt equally wrong not to do anything. As a result, in the correspondence that followed with the ministry and the committee, I abandoned the claim against the compulsory psychiatric evaluation. Instead, I asked for a shorter psychiatric assessment period, a more transparent assessment process, and a publicly available list of competent assessment providers. If implemented, this could have made the evaluation process more manageable for at least some of the people subjected to it. Still, it left me with a deep feeling of morally and politically uncomfortable loss. It felt as if I agreed with the necessity of the psychiatric evaluation and became complicit in it. Further, I had no way of knowing whether my reading of what was possible to demand was accurate, let alone what the long-term consequences of my decision would be.

Thus far, I have conceptualized this form of compromise as a relation toward dominant actors, institutions, or publics. In this relation, activists and advocates change their self-conception and presentation, demands, or goals to become recognizable or legitimate within the frame of reference of these dominant actors. In the following subsections, I attend to two other relations that constitute this form of compromise—the tension between desirable and achievable change, and the tension between perceived opportunities and restrictions for change.

5.1 Experiential Tension: Between the Desirable and the Achievable

The compromise discussed here is relative to both what I experienced as desirable and necessary, and what I perceived as potentially achievable. Without a perceived difference between the two, there would be no sense in talking about a compromise. Compromise as a relation serves a particular goal—in this case, minimizing barriers to gender-affirming care and legal recognition—but importantly, it also shapes how goals are posited and pursued. As Sara Heinämaa, Mirja Hartimo, and Ilpo Hirvonen (2022, 5) put it, goals are posited "based on our awareness of our own personal abilities and the general capacities of human beings as well as our beliefs about and expectations of our surrounding world and its situational features." Compromise as a relation is about positing and pursuing goals that are less than or some modification of what is desirable or necessary. Hence, it is the experiential relationship between the two—the desirable and achievable—that requires attention.

Notably, the distinction between the desirable and potentially achievable is slippery. As Judith Butler (1997; 2015) has argued, it is not only subjects' strategic possibilities but also their hermeneutical capacities, desires, interests, and needs that are influenced by sociocultural norms, power hierarchies, and habitual ways of being, knowing, and acting. What is experienced as desirable is shaped, among other things, by the situation and it shifts as the situation changes. Imagining the phenomenology of compromise as a relation between the desirable and potentially achievable could, as a result, run into problems, as the desirable is as context-sensitive as the potentially achievable.

Given this consideration, while such compromises emerge from social relations that constrain the field of the possible, there is no need to presume a clear distinction between what Clarissa Hayward has identified as "free action and action distorted by power" (1998, 10) or what Judith Butler has termed the "emancipatory model of agency" (Benhabib et al. 1995, 136). At the core of both is the idea that "power's exercise constrains and enables all social action" (1998, 19) and that "there is no opposition to power which is not itself part of the very workings of power" (Benhabib et al. 1995, 137). Following both theorists, it makes sense to say that, similarly to the potentially achievable, the desirable is a product of power relations, constrained and enabled

by the actions of others. At the same time, both the desirable and potentially achievable pertain to experience and perception. As a result, the relationship between the two is not that of an authentic subjective will and external circumstances, since both are subjectively and situationally constituted.

Notably, Butler (1993, xi) also instructs their readers not to think of "constructed" as lacking significance, experiential weight, or necessity for being and becoming a subject. Even if the desirable does not reflect the subject's desires unencumbered by power relations, it still figures as a central part of their lived experience and, as such, shapes the goals they want to pursue and perceive as pursuable in the face of structural or interpersonal restraints and opportunities. Furthermore, achieving something previously out of reach may open possibilities for new desires to emerge or become pressing. Considering their interactional relationship, the desirable becomes intelligible in relation to the potentially achievable, and vice versa. It is possible to desire to achieve that within or proximate to what is possible, not what is rendered entirely outside of it.

In the situation I found myself in, it is equally intelligible to say I desired (1) for trans people not to be subjected to compulsory psychiatric evaluation and (2) a world in which states lack regulatory power over the gender identification, expression, and transition trajectories of their citizens and residents. These are, notably, different desires. Although neither was achievable, the first was, and still is, more proximate to it. The first does not contest the state's power to decide who is worthy of transitioning legally and medically; it merely advocates for more accessible means of evaluating such worth. The second desire explicitly challenges this logic. In relation to what I perceived to be potentially achievable—a more manageable, accessible, and transparent psychiatric evaluation process—it was only the first desire that felt intelligible. The second was, in a sense, too unreal to be registered as a legitimate thing to desire, let alone be formulated as a political demand.

Following Paisley Currah, these desires, while different, were not "necessarily incompatible" (2022, 96). Currah shares his experience in working with various US state agencies to change their standards of sex reclassification and, at the same time, arguing as a political scholar for "ending [the state's] ability to use sex to distribute resources, rights, and privileges" (2022, 96). He notes about holding the two positions simultaneously:

> One might see them […] as inhabiting different time frames, or moving at different speeds: one is a short-term objective of recognition to alleviate the material problems of misclassified individuals in the here and now, and the other is a long-term vision of a government that does not tell anyone what sex they are […] The appearance of one or the other might depend […] on what position is most intelligible and useful in a particular context. (Currah 2022, 96–97)

Recognizing that these objectives or desires are, or can be, compatible presumes that the potentially achievable is, at least temporarily or partially, synonymous with the desirable. Perceiving a more accessible, transparent, and manageable psychiatric evaluation process as potentially achievable meant it was also desirable, given the circumstances I found myself in. Such a change would have alleviated at least some of the problems trans people were facing, albeit likely only for the intersectionally least disadvantaged.[7]

Notably, temporality plays an important role in the relationship between the desirable and achievable. In my case, advocating for a more manageable psychiatric evaluation felt like I could intervene in the ill-treatment of trans people in the here and now, as opposed to making demands that might only be realized in a more distant future. However, compromise can also function as an incremental stepping stone toward a more desirable future, as it can open up possibilities that are unimaginable or unachievable in the present (see, e.g., Evans 2016; Feola 2025). Treating compromise as a stepping stone can alleviate the sense of loss that results from

[7] For a sustained argument on how rights-based advocacy can leave intersectionally disadvantaged LGBTQ groups behind, see, for example, Zein Murib (2023).

sacrificing the desirable for the achievable, making such compromises more acceptable. However, uncertainties about the future seem unresolvable, meaning that advocating for less-than-desirable outcomes entails accepting some (risk of) loss.

5.2 Interpersonal and Structural Tensions: Between Opportunities and Restrictions

To better understand the sociopolitical dimension of compromise as a relation, I will think with the analytical framework of the "powercube." The framework was proposed and gradually developed by John Gaventa (2005; 2020; 2021), among other researchers and practitioners, to analyze power in civil society participation.[8] The framework draws on Steven Lukes' three-dimensional view of power. Lukes (2021, 21–34) proposed three different ways power can manifest in political decision-making: the visible dimension, which refers to who prevails in observable decision-making; the hidden dimension, which refers to unobservable decisions that condition the observable decision-making process; and the invisible dimension, which refers to the institutional practices, dominant sociocultural norms, and the broader sociopolitical context in which both observable and unobservable decision-making is embedded.[9]

John Gaventa complicates this view, arguing that what Lukes took to be three dimensions of power should, in a more refined analysis, be understood as a continuum in a one-dimensional space that Gaventa calls "forms of power" (2021, 109). Gaventa adds two further dimensions to the power analysis: "spaces of power," the relative openness of the venues in which engagement occurs; and "levels of power," the political reach of that venue (2006, 25). While Gaventa stresses that the three dimensions should be analyzed in relation to one another, I will investigate only the spaces and forms of power, as the primary aim of this paper is not to analyze power but to elucidate the interpersonal dimension of compromise as a relation.

Spaces of power include closed spaces, in which political decision-making occurs behind closed doors; invited spaces, in which affected community members are invited to participate in the political decision-making; and claimed or created spaces, in which the less powerful create their own autonomous spaces to shape and empower their agenda (Gaventa 2021, 119–122). Spaces of power are "opportunities, moments and channels where citizens can act to potentially affect policies, discourses, decisions and relationships that affect their lives and interests" (2006, 26). Given that spaces of participation are not neutral but shaped by existing power relations, Gaventa suggests the critical question is, "how they were created, and with whose interests and what terms of engagement" (26).

The space in which my advocacy work took place could be conceptualized as an invited space, in which people affected by decisions, or their representatives, are invited to participate in political decision-making. The representatives of the ministry created the space and controlled its boundaries, including what was discussed, who was invited to participate, and in what capacity or role. The initial aim of these meetings, and the ministry's primary goal, was to get the medical assessment committee up and running so the state could continue fulfilling its obligations to its citizens and residents, not to redesign the service to meet the trans community's needs. As an invited participant, I was not granted the ability to shape or define the boundaries of that space, and my role was limited to offering feedback on the discussion. Furthermore, my suggestions or concerns were not binding and could be easily downplayed or rejected by more authoritative voices in the room. I was granted the agency to offer my perspectives on how to arrange the compulsory psychiatric evaluation, but the (non-)decision to introduce the assessment was made before I entered the room. As a result, the space of engagement did open up opportunities for change. However, because of the narrow perimeters of what was

[8] See also the web-based resource: https://www.powercube.net/

[9] The concepts "visible," "hidden," and "invisible" were initially proposed by Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller (2007)

considered possible, the space also restricted claims-making, tilting it toward maintaining the status quo. As a result, the only way the space was open to me as an advocate was through a relation of compromise.

As noted earlier, forms of power pertain to how power manifests itself in the decision-making process. In my particular case, all the forms of power were present. On the one hand, the decision-making process was visible and relatively inclusive. On the other hand, as Gaventa puts it, the appearance of "hidden and invisible power may simply mean that even in [invited] spaces, voices become echoes of what powerful actors want to hear" (2021, 120). The hidden power highlights that ministry officials, along with health care providers, controlled the the meeting agenda. While I was invited to participate in the discussion, I was not invited to participate in the decision-making process itself. The power I had was to share my concerns and suggestions. I lacked both decision-making power and agenda-setting power.

Invisible power also played a vital role in these discussions. In one of the early papers on the powercube, Gaventa described the hidden power as the power of "shaping meaning and what's acceptable," including how the less powerful "envision future possibilities and alternatives" (2005, 15). Whereas hidden power defines the boundaries of what is discussed, who is invited to participate, and in what role, invisible power defines what is experienced and perceived as possible, realistic, or rational, across the claims-making, agenda-setting, and decision-making levels of the political process. The (non-)decisions made in the hidden and visible power levels are nested within the invisible power. Invisible power can refer to both intentional and unintentional acts. As a result, it can be conceptualized as a situation in which powerful actors intentionally shape the preferences and perceptions of the less powerful, and as a broader sociopolitical context that shapes the powerful and the powerless alike. While both senses of hidden power may be relevant, as I lack tools to evaluate other parties' intentions, I follow the understanding that invisible power pertains to dominant sociocultural norms or common sense, which define boundaries of what is experienced as possible, reasonable, or responsible.

For illustration, I will look at one example of norms that shaped these deliberations and framed my desires and demands as politically and medically unreasonable. This is what Cressida Heyes and J.R. Latham have referred to as "trans exceptionalism" (2018), an epistemological viewpoint summarized as a "way of thinking [that] constitutes trans procedures and patients as a separate category that therefore must be treated differently" (Latham 2017, 48). As Heyes and Latham note, trans exceptionalism often manifests in the requirement that trans people need to undergo "considerable psychiatric scrutiny" (2018, 185) to access transition-related care as their "requests do not enforce a cultural norm" (Latham 2017, 43). Of course, the tendency to view trans people as an exceptional patient group is nested within a broader tendency of health systems to be driven by curative aims rather than well-being. As Christoph Hanssmann (2023, 47) explains, trans movements' demand for "care without pathology" goes against general biomedical practices and norms, which dictate pathologization as a prerequisite for treatment, place patients and clients in an epistemologically disadvantaged position in making care decisions, and center reimbursement schemes around a diagnosis and a narrow definition of medical necessity.

The invisible form of power, like the invited space of power, can have ambiguous effects on activists and advocates. While sociocultural norms constrained what was considered possible—proposed changes needed to fit the limits of particular medical norms upheld by decision-makers—they may also create opportunities for an immanent critique: challenging a norm or practice from within. In this case, while challenging the need for the psychiatric evaluation felt out of bounds, it was possible to mobilize the norms associated with medical ethics, such as patient autonomy, well-being, and human dignity, to demand a more human-centered evaluation process. At the same time, immanent critique also entailed a sense of loss for me, as the incremental reform I pursued was not meaningful enough to realize those values from the perspective of those subjected to the evaluation.

6. Conclusion: From Mobilization of Norms to Experiences of Loss

Compromise as a relation contributes to existing research in three ways. First and foremost, it elucidates one particular way activists and advocates may enact and experience compromising and being compromised in their movement work, namely, through changing themselves, their demands, goals, or strategies to become recognizable or legitimate within some other's frame of reference. This sense of compromise presumes that, in advancing their cause, activists and advocates need particular others who are partly open to their claims, providing both opportunities and restrictions for change. As activists and advocates align themselves with those opportunities and restrictions, they need to, at least temporarily, let go of what they desire or need, so they could advance what they perceive is possible to achieve. What makes such compromises especially fraught is the uncertainty that pervades activists' and advocates' decisions and assessments, as well as the risk that compromising may harm some of the movement's constituents. Analysis of such compromises should attend to their experiential features and sociopolitical conditions—including power relations, social norms, and institutional practices that shape what is imaginable, desirable, and formulable in political claims-making—while recognizing the interrelation between these dimensions. Second, the paper has opened up a different form of relationality for thinking about compromise, one that both complements and integrates existing accounts of intra- and interpersonal forms of compromise. Lastly, the paper has demonstrated the value of integrating political and philosophical studies of compromise with research on social movements and social change—a research direction that remains underutilized (see Lange 1990; Dereniowska and Matzke 2018; Bärnthaler 2024).

In the remaining concluding section, I wish to return to two notions of compromise outlined thus far only in passing—mobilization of norms and experiences of loss—and reflect on what they might mean for engaging in social justice-oriented work. I refrain from formulating a normative account of when, how, or whether to compromise in pursuing social change. Decisions about which parts of ourselves or our visions for justice are negotiable, if any, depend on both personal and collective deliberations and should be considered in their situated particularities. Such decisions should ideally take into account both short- and long-term consequences, including how they impact self- and group-conceptions. Clearly, there are situations in which adopting an orientation of compromise is objectionable, meaning it would be better to withdraw from engaging with dominant actors, logics, or publics. Yet, there are situations in which we do decide to engage with oppressive structures, either because we have no other choice or because we hope that the harm doing so may cause is, in some sense, outweighed by its potential benefits. In situations where creating community-led clinics is unviable—because of money, expertise, and staffing, or because the state has legally monopolized some or all transition-related services—I consider advancing trans people's access to health care a case in which orienting oneself in relation to power-holders is unavoidable, even if also morally and politically fraught. As such, I did decide to orient myself toward the health care providers and ministry officials through a relation of compromise.

My decision to advocate for something less than desirable stemmed from a conflict with health care providers and ministry officials concerning access to transition-related care. That conflict was nested within broader dominant social norms and institutional practices. The underlying differences in what I saw as necessary and what most of society is imagined to perceive as normal or natural mattered in my decision. One way these differences may influence a particular disagreement is that the decision-maker may find it easy to ignore claims that radically differ from the norm. While compromise as a relation does not include mutual concessions, I hoped for the health care providers to concede from their current position or step closer toward a trans rights position. I offered concessions to align myself and reach an agreement with health care providers. It felt that ending the compulsory psychiatric evaluation was not something health care providers and ministry officials would agree with. However, I felt that making the evaluation more accessible and transparent, and using the

language of patient autonomy, well-being, and human dignity to make that claim, created at least a possibility for an agreement.

As such, dominant sociocultural norms play an ambiguous role in compromise as a relation. While movement actors make claims opposing sociocultural norms they view as harmful or oppressive, they can also mobilize these norms to make their demands more legitimate and understandable for those they attempt to address. However, the norms mobilized in claims-making also condition the perceived ill-treatment of those in whose name claims are made. As a result, movement actors may participate in the very harms they oppose, leaving them with feelings of loss, betrayal, complicity, or wrongdoing. Compromise as a relation helps elucidate that the relationship between social movements and sociocultural norms is reciprocal. Just as movements attempt to challenge and resist commonsensical ways of being, knowing, and acting, they too may be shaped and changed through their claims-making.

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