The Oppressed Identity.
Adverse Childhood Experiences and Mutual Aid
By Caroline Sanders

Introduction and post-script.

Since writing this I have been privileged to be part of the Dialectical Social Ecology Group facilitated by John P Clark, have received feedback from the Anti University Now presentation, Heather Luna, and from Douglas Killeya who reminded me about Alice Millar. All these influences have improved this analysis, along with feedback from comrades at The Commoner who published an edited version of this.

Parameters and Clarifications.

Hierarchy, authority and power are complex, contested and interrelated concepts upon which many books have been written. For the purpose of this article I am using a simple definition of hierarchy as a situation where one person or group of people have power and authority over another.

1.
People can get physical and mental health conditions if they have *not* experienced adverse childhood experiences within the family.
BUT
People *will* get physical and mental health conditions if they have experienced adverse childhood experiences within the family

2.
We can extrapolate from this analysis of the adverse childhood experiences research that **ANY** hierarchy holds the possibility of creating harm and trauma experiences for those at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Within capitalism there are systemic oppressions from hierarchies and from competitive and possessive modes of being everywhere. These are harmful and impact on our physical and mental health.

So if we haven't experienced harm within the family, we are surely going to experience them elsewhere. *THIS HARM WILL BE LIFE LIMITING*.

BUT

I am focusing on just this specific research on ACES within the family as a *microcosm*. The hierarchy within the family both helps submission to wider hierarchy and the wider hierarchy reinforces family hierarchy -reciprocal relationship..

The ACE's research shows us how harm can be delivered within hierarchy and the concrete outcomes of that harm

3.

I am not challenging the validity of the specific ACE's research or the questions.

I am challenging the assumptions that the family structure cannot be changed, or that this is just inevitable, that it just happens, or puts the blame on bad parents. We can reimagine families, and also draw on historical experiments and other ways of organising families.

I am also challenging and developing their solution which is that developing social networks for families will improve outcomes for children. I welcome the emphasis on social and environmental causes of physical and mental health and I agree that the solutions lie within community. Nevertheless, if social networks are hierarchical they will re-traumatise the individuals and create more harm and worse physical and mental health outcomes.

4.

Let's re-imagine the family.

The family – within the enlightened community - holds a contradiction at its heart;

The family has a necessary hierarchical relationship derived from competence which keeps children safe, teaches them. BUT any hierarchy carries dangers of abuse and domination..

So the contingency is an explicitly communal dynamic activity, practising non-hierarchical and non-dominating relationships whilst keeping a watchful eye and mitigating against the dangers present in the necessary hierarchy.

A process of becoming a new kind of family which acknowledges hierarchy within its non-hierarchical practices, values and imagination.

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PART ONE

'*The hallmark of political anarchism is its opposition to the established order of things: to the state, its institutions, the ideologies that support and glorify these institutions. The established order must be destroyed so that human spontaneity may come to the fore and exercise its right of freely initiating action, of freely choosing what it thinks is best.*'

Paul Feyerabend. Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge

1. Adverse Childhood Experiences

Adverse childhood experiences (ACE's) are potentially traumatic events that occur to us before the age of 18. It is thought that children experience a toxic stress response to these experiences, and that this toxic stress alters the biochemistry of neuroendocrine systems. Research on the plasticity of the brain shows us how social, economic and environmental conditions impact on brain development. Exposure to adverse childhood experiences affects our development, and this leads to mental and physical health problems for children and adults. Adults with multiple adverse childhood experiences may have difficulty forming loving relationships; struggle with depression and anxiety; and have poor physical health outcomes, including shortened life expectancy. Furthermore, the effects of adverse childhood experiences can also be passed on to children, so there can be a trans-generational aspect to adverse childhood experiences. 'Some children may face further exposure to toxic stress from historical and ongoing traumas due to systemic racism or the impacts of poverty resulting from limited educational and economic opportunities.'

We can see that adverse childhood experiences can impact people's economic situation; there may be an increased likelihood of poverty as a result of adverse childhood experiences. Economic inequality is oppressive and traumatic in and of itself. As we will see, a child in poverty starts life with at least one ACE just because they do not have enough to eat.

The first research into adverse childhood experiences took place in the United States at Kaiser Permanente between 1995 and 1997. 'The study's participants were 17,000 mostly white, middle and upper-middle class college-educated San Diegans with good jobs and great health care - they all belonged to the Kaiser Permanente health maintenance organisation.' The ACE questionnaire used in the study had ten yes/no questions asking participants about childhood experiences of violence, abuse and neglect. The participants scored one point for each yes, and zero points for each no, yielding a total ACE score out of ten.

We will look at and discuss the questions in more detail below, but in essence what the study showed was that as each participant's ACE score increased, so did their chances of 'disease, social and emotional problems. With an ACE score of 4 or more, things start getting serious.

**'The likelihood of chronic pulmonary lung disease
increases 390 percent; hepatitis, 240 percent; depression 460 percent; attempted suicide, 1,220 percent.'**

The research and evidence seemed to confirm that there are often social causes for mental and physical health challenges, and that what happens to us as children has far greater consequences on us as adults than was previously thought.

This study was conducted on middle-class people. It could be that economic family privileges under capitalism, like inherited wealth or private-school education and networks, ensures some people who have experienced adverse childhood experiences do not live in poverty - economic wealth is hoarded and protected. They may live with anxiety and heart disease, but still be a stockbroker. It seems reasonable to conclude from this study, however, that wealth does not necessarily protect people from poor health outcomes.

Shockingly, 'Adverse childhood experiences are common. About 61% of adults surveyed across 25 states in America reported that they had experienced at least one type of ACE, and nearly 1 in 6 reported they had experienced four or more.' Nearly two thirds of the population of the United States of America have reported at at least one traumatic experience as a child.

The evidence challenged the model of mental and physical health that says that there is something wrong with me because I am defective in some way. This model of innate biological defectiveness is the one that people usually use to explain their physical and mental health problems. This is connected with a prevalent view that we are born with a personality or nature; a 'self'. In fact research on brain plasticity shows us that this is not the case. We are in a constant state of becoming, there is no 'self', and in fact poor mental and physical health is a complex relationship between social, economic, psychological, and biological factors. This might otherwise be known as the biopsychosocial model for understanding mental health. The ACE's research helpfully highlighted this link between what happens to us and our mental and physical health.

We all live within multiple hierarchies with most of us towards the bottom of those hierarchies, and many people will experience some kind of abuse, trauma, and oppression. I have not met any parent who deliberately wanted to harm their child in the last thirty years of working with families, children, and young people. But we live in a toxic system, and the way we organise families is fertile ground for abuse, not because of the people, but because of the very nature of hierarchy itself. Those at the top of a hierarchy inevitably having power and authority over those at the bottom, and children are always at the bottom..

2. An interpretation of the ACE's questions

.1 ACE questions 1 - 3

1. *Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often ... Swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you? Or act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt?*
2. *Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often … Push, grab, slap, or throw something at you? Or ever hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?*
3. *Did an adult or person at least 5 years older than you ever … Touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way? or Attempt or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with you?*

We know that all children are vulnerable by their very nature as children, but adults are supposed to look after children. So what goes wrong? Why do adults or parents, who should love their children, sometimes commit acts of violence upon them? It is within the very nature of hierarchy that we can always see the danger of violence, abuse, and oppression. Children are always within these hierarchies when they are with adults in our society, even with the adults that love them. In a hierarchy, one person or group of people have authority and power over others, derived from status, economic resources, and characteristics such as strength, age, or through the political-legal process. Such people have the power to make the decisions for others, to oppress, control and change the behaviour of others, and dominate the scope of the particular hierarchy. They can do this in a number of ways; benignly by persuasion, rewards, and reason, or malignantly through punishment, coercion, and violence. What is always clear is that the oppressor fails to apprehend the oppressed as a free human being, who should be accorded dignity, respect and choice. For the oppressor, the oppressed are just material objects to dominate.

The '*#MeToo*' movement demonstrated the prevalence of sexual assault and rape by those in positions of power and authority. 'Far and away, most sexual assaults and sexual violence are perpetrated by men, and typically arise within asymmetrical power dynamics, where the perpetrator occupies a more powerful or dominant position in relation to the victim.' It should not surprise us, therefore, that within a hierarchical institution which has an asymmetrical power dynamic, such as the family, violent acts are sometimes perpetrated on children within that family as exertions of power and control. The parents hold authority and power derived from their existence as adults, and the scope is huge and encompasses almost the whole life of the child.

The love expressed within families can be the most profound and meaningful emotion of our lives, creating the most important relationships.Families can be a source of strength and inspiration. Adults who let children grow freely; accepting and validating them, able to engage actively in the dynamic process of becoming, which is *the* process of child rearing, are amazing. As Hume, and the science of neuroplasticity tells us, there is no 'self' or concrete essence, there is just the activity of becoming, and the ethical choices we make each day. A parent who understands that, and practices unconditional love, is liberating for a child in their care.

While we might imagine that it would, parental love, however, does not always mitigate against the inherent danger in the hierarchy. The desire to objectify and possess 'the other' can be part of our inauthentic carer/child relationships.This possessive mode of being sadly permeates through capitalist society. Parental language can articulate their children as objects in relation to themselves: e.g., 'he has my eyes', or 'he is lazy, like you'. Parents see aspects of themselves reflected back in their children, rather than seeing their children as free individuals: they see them as objects. They see them as 'their' objects', to be defined, possessed, and controlled. This particular relationship is heightened because of children being created by parents, and because of family resemblances.

All kinds of beliefs and values can then be wrapped around 'our' children, who are unable to speak or challenge these assumptions. For example, adults may feel anxious at the emotions their children are expressing and worry that their children are manipulative, or liars, or angry. In reality these are simply reactions or attitudes towards an oppressive relationship,

not an essence or personality or a 'self'. Parents can get confused as they see their child as 'the other', as resistant or defiant.They believe this is their nature, rather than an attitude towards circumstance.

Love, rather than mitigating dangers of hierarchy, can sometimes actually increase the dangers to a child, as the 'object of love' refuses to comply with instructions and parental beliefs, and insists on their individual freedom. Children can react with anger and frustration, or withdraw completely as they react to any false claims about them. In an effort to control and possess, the parent can commit acts of violence upon 'their' child.

2 ACE questions 4 - 5

4. *Did you often or very often feel that … No one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special? Or your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each othe*r?
5. *Did you often or very often feel that … You didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you? Or your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed i*t?

The discovery of the Romanian orphanages after Soviet-aligned dictator Nicolai Ceausescu was overthrown, informed much of the research on neglect. 'They found many profound problems among the children who had been born into neglect. Institutionalised children had delays in cognitive function, motor development and language. They showed deficits in socio-emotional behaviours and experienced more psychiatric disorders. They also showed changes in the patterns of electrical activity in their brains, as measured by EEG.' Again, the very existence of children within a hierarchy opens up possibilities of the absence of action, as a means of control; i.e. neglect.

We know that patterns of coercive control, withdrawing of love, stonewalling, not meeting needs, and hoarding and conserving material resources, are aspects of abuse. Within hierarchical systems we see these patterns all the time; in governments who decide on the distribution of resources, frequently refusing money and resources to supposedly undeserving citizens. In families, parents and carers decide on clothes, toys, and other resources, depending on the child's behaviour or other often arbitrary or capricious criteria. It is not novel to connect the hierarchy of state and family; feminist critics like Carol Patemen have long theorised the connection being fatherhood and the paternal dominance of the State. This is abuse and oppression by commission, to visibly exert control over those at the bottom of the hierarchy.

These neglect patterns can also exist by omission. A person may be emotionally and materially neglectful because they are in poverty, and are struggling to make ends meet, for example. There is something blocking the giving of love and material resources to their children. Even in these cases, where there is not commissioned exertion of power and control, the very fact of the hierarchy makes the child unsafe.
The dependence on the parent who is unable to meet needs, a parent who is probably a victim of multiple hierarchies and systemic oppression themselves, means the child experiences toxic stress. In fact, other hierarchies often take over in these cases; schools, churches, or social services, for example. They step into the deficit and provide food and

resources for the child. Some schools provide nurture provision to make up for the emotional neglect the child has experienced. But they can also become abusers.

.3 ACE questions 6 - 10

6. *Were your parents ever separated or divorced*?
7. *Was your mother or stepmother: Often or very often pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at her? Or sometimes, often, or very often kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard? Or ever repeatedly hit at least a few minutes or threatened with a gun or knife*?
8. *Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic or who used street drug*s?
9. *Was a household member depressed or mentally ill, or did a household member attempt suicide*?
10. *Did a household member go to priso*n?

These questions are indicative of trans-generational abuses and oppression. Of course, all the questions do indicate trans-generational patterns, but these identify parents who are obviously struggling and suffering from their own adverse childhood experiences, or from other experiences of oppression.Their child is now born into a hierarchy that has instability built in. The rules of the hierarchy may be unclear. It may be scary. It may be dangerous. The problem of hierarchies, and of being at the bottom of the hierarchy, is that we don't determine the conditions or outcomes.

Adverse childhood experiences occur within families which are hierarchical institutions within capitalist society. Hierarchies are inherently dangerous for those towards the bottom, and create opportunities for violence, abuse and neglect because the oppressor regards the oppressed as an object. So the hierarchical family provides the conditions for adverse childhood experiences. The number of adverse childhood experiences suffered by a child tells us much about the degree of hierarchical damage done to that child.

Parental or carer love can sometimes amplify the oppressors' tendency to make an object of the oppressed. Parents/carers can form relationships with their children as 'the other' and can define, control, and possess them. Parents/carers create these relationships in that moment of judgement; a judgement often formed from values brought about by their own trans-generational trauma, trauma from other oppressive experiences of domination in hierarchy, or from the dominant ideology. Those being oppressed are created as 'this' or 'that' for all time. A mistaken idea that there is a 'self' or essence, a nature or personality, rather than an understanding of plasticity.These are relationships of oppression, firstly through hierarchy, and secondly through inauthentic parental love, and they create oppressed identities for children as they become adults. As adults, we may think of ourselves in the way that our oppressors, our parents/carers, thought of us.

We understand then:

i) *That the hierarchical family can create oppressed identities for children through the quality of the oppressive relationships, and;*

ii) That the quantity of adverse childhood experiences is the degree of hierarchical damage caused by the family. This damage creates physical, emotional, and mental health problems. Early oppression is deadly.

There are broader conclusions we can draw too. It can be argued that these experiences embed acceptance and submission to other hierarchies and oppression, and also that external hierarchies reinforce hierarchies within family.
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Moreover, we can extrapolate that we may experience toxic stress every time we experience hierarchical oppression, and domination in the broader systems of capitalism, which will negatively impact our life expectancy and happiness. Capitalism and its hierarchies are killing us.

What is crucial to understand is that prevention measures and solutions that do not explicitly acknowledge that it is the hierarchical nature of the family which actually creates the conditions for adverse childhood experiences to exist, will create further problems for children, families, and adults. If we create social networks for people, who may have experienced trauma in childhood, or are currently experiencing adverse childhood experiences, and those social networks are also hierarchical, we run a high risk of creating further problems, further toxic stress, and further illness.

Despite this, even if our oppressed identity is ingrained and we have a high degree of hierarchical damage, and an ACE score of four or more, we can still change the inevitable outcomes towards feeling physically better, and emotionally happier. The brain has plasticity throughout our lives, and so what we do matters, and we can still heal just as well and as easily as we can damage. It is important that we can and do repair the damage to us, and also prevent further damage to children, including our own children.

By acknowledging and understanding the damage we ourselves have suffered within the hierarchy of the family, we can look forward to being, and to raising, creative, authentic individuals who are healthy and happy, and who do not accept or submit that we have to organise in a hierarchical way. As anarchists, we are perhaps best posed to challenge this structure since we stand opposed to all forms of dominance.

In the second part of this essay, I will reflect further on the hierarchy of the family and propose how it might be remedied through community mutual aid or an enlightened community.

End of part one

PART TWO

3. Mutual Aid or Enlightened community

The ACE's research provides a range of solutions for children, young people and families identified as 'at risk'. One consistent and responsive adult in a child's life can significantly change the outcomes for that child. Parenting using play, love, acceptance, curiosity, and empathy can help a child to feel safe, reducing anxiety and toxic stress. Developing social networks can support parents with social and economic stressors, meaning that parents or adults do not feel so alone in coping with difficulties, as well as getting practical support for economic or relationship problems. Also, abuse can be spotted, and preventative support can be netted around behaviours. Community is also a good in itself, as we know that isolation also causes emotional and physical health problems.

The research solutions are positive but they still employ an assumption that growing the social networks with professional guidance, with hierarchy unquestioned, and with experts having authority will solve the problem. There are remnants of the faulty individual view, as the interventions are only open to those identified by the state as *at risk*, which is a damaging supposition for somebody already suffering from adverse experiences, and especially if that view is taken by someone in a position of power and authority. The negative judgement which has initiated all this interference feels shameful, and reinforces our oppressed identity.

Regardless of how one might imagine child-rearing in the future, the possibility of hierarchy and oppression cannot be simply just ruled out. This is because those looking after children will necessarily be responsible for their young charges, and will, of necessity, be in a position to prevent them from acting in ways that are not in the minors' best interests. This could be preventing immediate, quantifiable harms, e.g., running into traffic, or ingesting toxic substances, or preventing long-term, less quantifiable harms that might impede their future flourishing, such as neglecting their education. But when you are in a position to justifiably prevent others from doing what they wish because it would be counter to their interests, you are also in a position to prevent others from doing what they wish for less noble reasons. Therefore, the matter of how best to prevent early oppression and adverse childhood experiences within necessarily hierarchical relationships is not a simple design problem: it is not a matter of saying, 'if we brought up children like this the hierarchies would immediately and permanently disappear and the oppression could not ever get started, therefore, adverse childhood experiences would be a thing of the past.' Rather, the solutions require an understanding of hierarchy and oppression and require us to maintain our vigilance; we must be able to see when it arises, as it sometimes will, and to take action. The solutions are thus to be found in educating people about the ACE's research, creating community support and conscious non-hierarchical social networks, trauma-informed relationships, and enabling nurture strategies to flourish.

.1 Mutual Aid and The Community of The Family

The family teaches us to do as we are told and embeds the nature of hierarchy and submission, and also practically ensures children and young people are not out on the street causing trouble. The family is both a pacifier and a policeman, and it is difficult to imagine

how that can change under capitalism. Both marxists and anarchists have argued however, that if we abolish the family then we could dismantle capitalism. Most of these reimaginings of the family focus on communal child-rearing, which is a possible solution and has roots in socialist and marxist traditions.

Sophie Lewis in a recent interview states that, "*It sounds scary, emotionally, when some people hear the phrase "family abolition. But when we say we want to abolish the family, we're not talking about taking away the few relationships and infrastructures of love that we have in this world.*" So, how do we ensure we encourage nurturing, loving relationships that keep children safe both emotionally and physically, but get rid of hierarchy and possibilities of abuse? I think using a mutual aid framework gives an interesting anarchist alternative to capitalist nuclear families, and communal approaches.

We can separate the functions of child-rearing into the *necessary* and the *contingent.* Necessary means essential and required. Contingent means accidental or by chance. When we are children, we are necessarily kept safe by adults, or, sometimes, by older siblings to whom adults may temporarily delegate this responsibility. In most cases, the family provides this necessary function, although other non-familial or extra-familial types of child-rearing also take place (within, say, children's homes or communes, for example). The initial and necessary relationship of hierarchy in the child-rearing environment provides safety for children, and the hierarchy exists by virtue of the fact that adults are older and have experience or *competence*. Children need adults to keep them safe, and if they don't provide this function then we begin the cycle of toxic stress. This is a relationship of safety and is essential.

If the contingent relationships within the family are also hierarchical this can really ramp up the danger for children.The question within the contingency is whether these adults can provide a nurturing environment, co-regulate children's emotions, and minimise the hierarchy. We cannot change the necessary conditions by definition, but we have to mitigate against this necessary and inevitable hierarchy through the contingent features of the social relationships involved.

To think of the contingent social relationship within the child-rearing environment then, is to see an opportunity to change. If the contingency is nurturing and empowering, and if a minimising of hierarchy takes place, if relationships are expressed which are non dominating, then this can help to mitigate the abuse that could arise from that initial and necessary hierarchy. Thus, changing the contingent aspects of the child-rearing environment can affect for the better exactly how the initial hierarchy works.It can be watchful for danger.

It is difficult for us to think about the contingent parts of child-rearing, since what we have now is treated as normality of common sense. It is important to remember, however, that many aspects of our society are contingent and can be changed. Family structures as we have them now form a part of our modern western capitalist state rule, and are promoted by the state. As the anthropological study of collective child-rearing among foragers shows, this is a historically specific practice, and does not have to last forever.

It is here that I think mutual aid can help us. Mutual aid was first discussed by Kropotkin, who drew on the findings of his fellow Russian naturalist Karl Kessler to argue that

cooperation, not competition, was the driving force of evolution.Communities that help each other out survive and thrive. In fact,mutual aid practice is non-hierarchical, and is organised by members of the community, rather than outsiders. Mutual aid usually uses consensus decision making, as well as forms of participatory democracy, and it is egalitarian.

Adults engaged in child-rearing could organise themselves into mutual aid communities. They would still live in small familial groups which would deliver the necessary hierarchy of safety, but would also be part of a mutual aid network with other groups of adults and children. By family, I mean any group of adults and children for whom the adults are responsible, regardless of whether the children are biologically related to the adults, and regardless of whether child-rearing is a paid occupation (such as with a person working in a children's home) or a commitment undertaken freely and without pecuniary compensation, as is often the case with biological parents and step-parents.

The carers and children of three or four families could gather together each week for community meetings.These mutual aid groups should be explicitly political and consciously premised on non-hierarchical principles, along with utilising playfulness, love, acceptance, curiosity, and empathy (PLACE) within Interactions.

Within the mutual-aid community, hierarchies would be prevented from developing because of a number of mitigating factors:

Firstly, there would need to be conscious competence about the dangers of hierarchies; reinforced by political education, plus desire to create change. Resources could be created and shared, and non-hierarchical processes developed and used. There must be an explicit acknowledgement that the necessary hierarchy in the smaller family units, the hierarchy of safety derived by the competence of adults exists and is inevitable but needs to be watched. Denial of this is dangerous and could lead to abuse. This would be an explicitly political activity;

 Secondly, the individual families would maintain their autonomy and so could act as challengers and supporters to other adults within the community if needed, avoiding collusion between adults if abuse occured within the necessary hierarchy;

Thirdly, the children would also be given voice in the meetings. If decisions were taken, the children's voice would count as like an adult's. Nobody would be an expert.The children may also understand better than anyone how actions and decisions make them feel. They must be able to voice these feelings.

Fourthly, everyone would contribute guided by trauma informed playful, loving, accepting, curious and empathic interactions within equality of relationship. (PLACE model- Dan Hughes). Creativity and imagination would be active.

So the mutual aid community becomes an active process of flourishing and thriving, engaged in producing consciously non-hierarchical, non-abusive relationships. The community is a social and moral good.

Children would still live in small autonomous families, who would be clearly responsible for the necessary hierarchical relationship of safety; a hierarchy of competence, and the parents/carers would be aware of this.

The contingent mitigation is produced within the community of reflection and the mutual aid relationship with other families.

The contingent carries an understanding of the contradiction at the heart of itself, that of hierarchy. The non-hierarchy exists because of the hierarchy and this creates a process of becoming, an emergent type of family organisation,

Mutual aid is also empowering, and mitigates the judgement that we discussed, and which we have termed as our oppressed identity. Our social relationships are based on the underlying premise that everyone has something to contribute. We feel empowered in the eyes of others because we have something to give. Our carers see us with pride as they recognize our capabilities and capacities. We therefore apprehend ourselves with pride, as being persons of value. We are not being 'done to' by a team of professionals who are supporting us, or even friends supporting us.

Our ideal parent/child relationship, opposed to the internalisation of an oppressed identity within oppressive hierarchies, is, instead, a liberating and empowering identity that has something important to contribute and a say in decision making. Emotional health would be supported in this system. Co-regulating each other's emotions would happen naturally and inevitably in a safe and nurturing social environment without hierarchy, where everyone is valued. Children would experience themselves as being of worth, with something to say and equally able to contribute to the community. Overwhelming emotions could be contained, empathised with, understood and normalised within the community of families. Emotional health would be improved and our degrees of hierarchical damage reduced, as the contingent aspects of the family social relationships mitigate the effects of the necessary hierarchy. Abuse would be less likely in this situation as children would have a voice and would feel valued, and adults would be supported within a nurturing community themselves.

This seems straightforward. All I am describing is a group of friends who have common and shared ideals in community and non-hierarchy, respecting a degree of freedom and autonomy, whilst sharing some public aspects of their lives together. Of course, it should and must seem straightforward: Kropotkin discussed mutual aid as a cooperative evolutionary process that enabled progress to happen. It is simple, natural and sustainable, and encourages creativity, authenticity, and flourishing. It is empowering. It is premised on the core belief that people do not wish harm to be done to themselves or others. This is the belief, supported through my own experience, that adverse childhood experiences do not usually happen intentionally through ill will by carers: most often it is as Socrates says, that no one does wrong knowingly.

.2 Mutual Aid and the Community of Professional Services

The community of professional services around the family and children, including schools, family support workers, social workers and mental health services, also need to understand the non-hierarchical model if they are to help. These professional services need to change considerably in order to be more supportive and less regulatory, so that they no longer hold the coercive power that current services do. Parents and children can often feel disempowered by professional services. Professionals working with families today in our current society, need to name hierarchy as the problem, challenge hierarchy wherever it arises, and not default to 'authoritarian' and 'expert' models.

As mutual aid family communities develop and thrive, the need for a group of professionals acting as experts should end, as we all learn and trust that human beings can and will flourish through actively engaging in non-hierarchical processes. It is this active cooperative learning process within mutual-aid communities that empowers and ends the need for 'experts'.

4. Conclusion

Hierarchy and adverse childhood experiences are bad for our health.[8] They are literally killing us. Hierarchy leads to **an increased risk of lung disease, diabetes, hepatitis, and depression, and work stress increases the chance of an early grave**[7]. Suddenly, political philosophy has gone from discussion around moral goods and competing values to something concrete and material.

The adverse childhood experiences research is an important framework that is bringing real benefit to people's lives by locating solutions to emotional, physical and mental health in social networks and nurturing strategies. It is breaking with a model that there is something biologically wrong with us, that we were born this way or that way. We know that human beings are not fixed, but are dynamic and developing, and that the brain has plasticity. We are born with some propensities but our environment and what happens to us, especially as children, creates and changes us biologically, emotionally, and psychologically. In the case of adverse childhood experiences, the damage can be profound and shocking and can have life-changing (and life-ruining) consequences. Equally, if we get things right, we co-regulate our emotions, nurture and develop safe and trusting relationships, we can all flourish together.

Hierarchy is fertile ground for adverse childhood experiences and for abuse. It creates an oppressed identity for us, because we understand that we have parents who can 'create us' in their judgement, as if we were an object for them. The oppressor always treats the oppressed as if they were an object, denying them their right to freedom at every turn. This oppressed identity is internalised and dictates our future sense of ourselves, and our capacity for agency and change.

Furthermore, the adverse childhood experiences can be understood as degrees of hierarchical damage which happen to us because we are oppressed and powerless at the bottom of this familial hierarchy. Thus children suffer abuse because it is the danger of all hierarchies to be abusive, and these abuses affect our health and life expectancy. We all become victims of a toxic system.

We must acknowledge that there is a necessary hierarchy, a hierarchy of competence where adults keep children safe and teach them. If the contingent relationships in family are also hierarchical, supportive of domination rather than challenging of it, then that ramps up the danger. The social and nurturing solutions that lie in the contingent realm need to properly mitigate against the dangers implicit in the necessary hierarchy of safety.

The solution, therefore, lies in families organising themselves into consciously political, non-hierarchical, mutual-aid relationships or enlightened communities which are empowering and liberating, and which protect the child from the hierarchical dangers present in their need for adults to both survive and flourish. We should employ playfulness, love, acceptance, curiosity, and empathy in our ways of relating to each other, and minimise hierarchies if they arise. The community of professionals around families should rid itself of 'expert' roles and instead embrace mutual-aid, and learn from these.

These enlightened communities would hold the contradiction within them as they emerge a new type of family. The contradiction between the necessary hierarchy and the non-hierarchy. The contingency watching the necessary hierarchy and flattening it at every opportunity whilst accepting its necessity. The non-hierarchy existing because of and in relation to the hierarchy in a process of becoming.

We need relationships where we apprehend each other authentically in freedom; where parents/carers apprehend their children as liberated, capable of choices and of change, and as empowered; where we all apprehend ourselves with pride and agency: within mutual-aid; without hierarchy.

At the very least, in our families, in our communities, and in our work, we must recognise the terrible danger that hierarchy presents to all of us from our earliest breath, and strive to do everything we can to change, and do things differently, and better.

'So that all may live this rich, overflowing life.'
Peter Kropotkin, 'Anarchist Morality'

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