

# TIGHTLACING AND ABUSIVE NORMATIVE ADDRESS

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In this paper, we introduce a distinctive kind of psychological abuse we call Tightlacing. We begin by presenting four examples and argue that there is a distinctive form of abuse in these examples that cannot be captured by our existing moral categories. We then outline our diagnosis of this distinctive form of abuse. Tightlacing consists in inducing a mistaken self-conception in others that licenses overburdening demands on them such that victims apply those demands to themselves. We discuss typical Tightlacing strategies and argue that Tightlacing typically is manipulative. Typical tightlacers will be motivated by a strong desire to suppress a kind of behaviour on the victim's part. We will then differentiate Tightlacing from a related and widely discussed form of psychological abuse, Gaslighting. While Gaslighting focuses on the victim's epistemic capacities and typically serves to insulate the abuser from potential dissent, Tightlacing focuses on the kind of person the victim is and typically serves to insulate the abuser from confronting ways of behaviour they cannot cope with. While Gaslighting targets the victim's epistemic self-trust, Tightlacing targets their basic sense of who they are and their sense of entitlement to conduct themselves as who they really are. We finish by diagnosing the wrong-making features of Tightlacing, arguing that Tightlacing, among many secondary wrongs, makes the victim complicit in a denial of their rights as well as an erasure of who they are.

**P**SYCHOLOGICAL abuse and its varieties are not common concerns in ethics.<sup>1</sup> It is obvious enough that psychologically abusive behaviour constitutes a

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1. "Emotional abuse" might be a more common term than "psychological abuse". However, since such abuse does not have to target specifically or mainly the victim's emotional capacities, we think "psychological abuse" is the more inclusive term.

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grave wrong and so broad ethical discussion may seem unwarranted. However, psychological abuse comes in many guises and often it is unclear whether specific behaviour qualifies as abuse and just what the wrong involved is. Psychologists acknowledge that we lack a clear grasp of what psychological abuse is and which kinds of behaviour fall under this category (DeHart et.al. 2010; Glaser 2002) and typically rely on vague and conjunctive definitions like the following:

Abuse is any behavior that is designed to control and subjugate another human being through the use of fear, humiliation, or verbal or physical assaults. Emotional abuse is any kind of abuse that is psychological rather than physical in nature, including verbal abuse, constant criticism, intimidation, manipulation, and a refusal to be pleased. (Gavin 2011: 504; italics removed)

While we are not going to put forward a general account of psychological abuse, this paper contributes to clarifying the issue by identifying and analyzing a specific kind of psychological abuse.

To our knowledge, the type of psychological abuse that has attracted most philosophical attention is Gaslighting (see Abramson 2014; Spear 2019; 2020; Stark 2019). It occurs when a person's epistemic self-trust is undermined by dismissive responses to factual or normative claims by that person. Thus, when victims of sexual harassment are told "I don't think this really happened", "You are misinterpreting this", or "You're overreacting, this is insignificant" and this drives them to lose trust in their own experience, what they suffer is Gaslighting.<sup>2</sup> This paper discusses a different kind of psychological abuse that we will call Tightlacing and offers a diagnosis of how exactly it constitutes a wrong. Tightlacing consists in inducing a mistaken self-conception in others that licenses overburdening demands on them, typically by means of direct moral address, and makes them apply these demands to themselves. Centrally, the wrong of Tightlacing consists in making its victim complicit in a denial of their rights and an erasure of who they are. It shares some aims and tactics with Gaslighting, but targets not a person's epistemic capacities but their sense of who they are and their sense of entitlement to conduct themselves as who they really are.

Tightlacing is a kind of abuse that is highly significant but undertheorized — as can be seen from the fact that there is not yet an established name for it. We will explore this phenomenon by examining a group of examples that uncontroversially constitute cases of abuse but do so in a way that is somewhat tricky to pin down: in these cases, it is elusive just what this wrong consists in and what

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2. Throughout this paper we use "Gaslighting" to refer to what Cynthia Stark (2019) calls "Manipulative Gaslighting", i.e., a manipulative strategy that undermines the victim's epistemic self-trust. We will not refer to what Stark calls "Epistemic Gaslighting" which is another name for testimonial injustice based on stereotypes about differences in credibility.

exactly it is one would blame the abuser for. We introduce “Tightlacing” as a name for this wrong and analyse its workings and wrong-making features. Our aim is to help people to identify when they or those they care about are being subjected to psychological abuse. We also aim to develop our understanding of the various forms that psychological abuse can take. Finally, we aim to expand our understanding of the various ways in which moral address can be misused.

In Section 1, we will introduce the kind of psychological abuse we have in mind by way of four examples and briefly consider some ways to make sense of the wrong involved in this case by appeal to common ethical categories. These, however, fail to explain the wrong in question. In Section 2 we develop our diagnosis of these cases: Tightlacing induces in its victim a mistaken conception of themselves which licenses demands on them that, on a more realistic view, are overdemanding. In Section 3 we discuss Tightlacing strategies, in particular the way in which normative address and presupposition can be used to tightlace someone and how Tightlacing is usually manipulative. In Section 4 we compare Tightlacing to Gaslighting. While these phenomena turn out to be similar in some ways, they also differ importantly, especially in that Gaslighting targets the victim epistemically while Tightlacing targets them in a behavioral regard. This leads over to Section 5 that argues that the central wrong involved in Tightlacing is making the victim complicit in a denial of their rights and an erasure of who they are, undermining their most basic sense of entitlement. This is accompanied by a number of secondary wrongs.

## 1. Examples of Tightlacing

Parent-child relationships are, unfortunately, common sites of psychological abuse. For this reason, the following example is paradigmatic of the kind of abuse we target:

### CHILD AGGRESSION

A father approaches his 10-year-old son in the son’s room. Earlier, when the family was having dinner, the son, who does well at school and is not normally grumpy or confrontational, angrily recounted how his teacher had been criticising him, and he expressed a degree of annoyance that from the parents’ perspective was exaggerated and unfounded and put everyone in a bad mood. Father to son: “Why do you have to behave like that? Your mother comes home late from work and has so many things that trouble her, why do you have to make her feel even worse? Can’t you behave enjoyably? Keep your ridiculous anger to yourself, that’s not helpful for anyone.” The father leaves the room, leaving the son devastated.

We are not going to argue that this is an instance of psychological abuse; we take this to be clear enough. Rather, we want to discuss what exactly makes the father's behaviour abusive, especially if we imagine such situations to recur in the family.

While much could be said about such behaviour, we will in the following attempt to diagnose one specific, and very grave, kind of wrong present in this example. There seems to be something fundamentally wrong in the way the son is addressed by his father. He is addressed in a way that makes it very hard for him to cope with the situation and that explains how we can imagine he feels after the scene: guilty, helpless, out of place, like a bad person, and as if it were unacceptable to be the way he is.

Before we diagnose the wrong involved here, let's consider three more examples of this kind of abuse.

### GENOCIDE SURVIVOR

When horrible societal crimes occur, silencing behaviour often follows. Imagine a society with a recent history of genocide, for example, Germany just after 1945. While most members of this society played no direct role in the genocide, many were silently complicit. We can imagine them to be strongly psychologically invested in leaving the past behind, not having the events brought up again. However, there will be others, especially direct victims of the crimes, who experience a great need to engage with what happened, to not let everyone just move on and suppress the recent evils.

This is the situation that philosopher and holocaust survivor Jean Améry faced after the Second World War. To avoid reopening old wounds and to allow people to focus on the future, prominent intellectuals demanded that Améry and his fellow victims move on from their resentment, or at least not mention it publicly. He describes how he and his fellow holocaust survivors were called, "to internalize our past suffering and bear it with emotional asceticism" (Améry 2009: 69). Those making such demands did not deny the wrongs that had been done, nor did they seek to minimize their severity.<sup>3</sup> However, they claimed that the time had come to move on and no longer bring up issues that belong in the past. This is something

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3. Though, of course, in the face of such wrongdoing it would not be surprising if victims found themselves facing these other forms of silencing too. They might, first, encounter explicit claims that what they bring up did not happen or explicit demands that they shut up. They might also experience Gaslighting: that their grasp of the events is questioned, their credibility undermined, the issue diffused by apparent counterevidence. They will find themselves manipulated into a position where they lose a sense of just what they want to bring up and whether they are competent to do so. Such Gaslighting strategies attempt to undermine an agent's trust in their epistemic capacities and thus diffuse the allegation they make on an epistemic level.

Améry (2009: 69) refused to do, claiming, “I lack the desire, the talent, and the conviction for something like that.” These calls became so influential that those, like Améry, who refused to do so were put in a position where one “must defend oneself for thinking this way” (Améry 2009: 69). While this is an extreme example, it is another case where someone is made to feel that they are out of place for their legitimate emotional reactions.

### CELIBACY

Francis is a Catholic monk. His decision for monkhood was not exactly free and informed, rather he was having a hard time in his early 20s and lacked a sense of what to do with his life. He joined a religious order because it appeared like the only option at a difficult moment. As is prerequisite for Catholic monkhood, he swore to live a celibate life. While taking his oath seriously, he cannot help but harbour sexual thoughts every now and then, and regularly finds himself fantasising about a woman he sees at mass. Increasingly, he finds his celibacy burdensome and develops a need to discuss it. When mentioning his trouble to his abbot, however, he faces rejection and condemnation. For a good monk, he is told, celibacy does not present a burden but rather the highest form of self-realisation. Monks live and act *in persona Christi*, and he mustn't let his “hedonism” spoil this. He is also reminded of St Paul's words that chastity is part of the ideal human life, “[a]nd this I say for your own profit, not that I may put a leash on you, but for what is proper, and that you may serve the Lord without distraction” (1 Corinthians 7:29–31). He is summoned to live up to this ideal and his oath, breaking which would amount to an unforgivable sin. Francis acknowledges all this; he is a religious person after all, he trusts his superiors, and feels bound by his oath. Consequently, he develops strong feelings of guilt about his sexual thoughts and starts chastising himself for them.

### MORALISM

Moralism is the vice of overdoing moral criticism of others. Imagine your colleague calls you out for every tiny piece of everyday behaviour that is not perfectly saintly. He starts the day by criticising your take-away coffee (“This produces so much waste”), comments on your shirt (“Have you made sure there was no child labour involved?”), questions your lunch choice (“Is this vegan and organically grown?”). You are criticised for printing too much, being a bad parent for working too much, being a bad colleague for sometimes making others feel inferior, and setting a bad example by occasionally using colloquial language. In short, your colleague brings up every aspect of your behaviour that can from some perspective be morally criticised. While none of the criticism may be completely mis-

guided and possibly all worth considering, the constant demands put you under pressure always to hold up maximally high standards and never to make the smallest moral mistake. You are demanded to be something like a saint, morally perfect regarding even the tiniest part of everyday behaviour, and you find it very difficult to reject this demand because, after all, none of the points your colleague brings up is wrong.

To some, this example may seem less problematic than the others, and they may view the colleague's moralism as merely annoying, not abusive. We think, however, that this example is only somewhat less likely to have the effect on the victim we find in the other examples. Especially for addressees who are very sensitive to moral address, we can imagine that moralistic address can make them feel as helpless in the face of seemingly justified demands as the child, the genocide survivor, and the monk in our other examples.

There seems to be something abusive and therefore wrong that unites these examples. But what exactly is it? A natural response is that too much is being demanded of the people involved in all of these cases. In the first case, we might think that the child is being held to unreasonable standards of emotional regulation. Given that emotion regulation is a skill developed throughout childhood and adolescence (Zeman et al. 2006), it might seem like the father is demanding too much from the child to be perfectly capable of regulating his emotions. Similarly, the trauma that genocide survivors have experienced gives us good reason not to be too demanding about how they should behave in response to their wrongdoers. The demands being made of Francis the monk also seem to go beyond what we can reasonably demand from people. Finally, it is a core feature of moralism that it involves making overly demanding moral judgements (Archer 2018: 344; Driver 2005) and the moralist in our example certainly seems to be overly demanding.<sup>4</sup>

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4. We might also diagnose at least two of these examples as cases that also involve an unfair distribution of demands. The child is demanded to regulate his emotions to avoid provoking a negative emotional response from his parents. The trauma victims are asked to regulate their emotions in order not to upset those who have wronged them. These situations are somewhat analogous to cases where victims of oppression are asked not to express the anger they feel in response to their oppression, in order not to provoke a backlash from their oppressors. Amia Srinivasan (2018) argues that this demand constitutes an *affective injustice*, as oppressed people must navigate the normative and psychological conflict between their apt emotional response and advancing their own interests (for further discussion see Archer & Mills 2019 and Gallegos 2022). We agree that there may be analogies to be drawn between our case and this form of affective injustice but do not think this fully captures the wrong in these cases. The problem in the child case for example is not simply that the child is asked to regulate away an appropriate response. Rather, he is blamed for failing to be in perfect control of his emotions. Srinivasan's examples involve victims being situated such that they have reasons to manage their emotions in a way that is possible though unfairly burdensome. Our examples involve people being manipulated into seeing such a demand as justified.

However, accurate though this diagnosis is, it does not seem to fully capture all that is going wrong in these examples. We think there is more to be said here and that all the examples, different as they are, involve the same kind of wrong. In each case, someone is addressed in a way that puts them under enormous pressure not to behave as is natural for them or not to give in to great emotional needs, and this demand is not justified. They are demanded to behave in a way that we cannot reasonably expect them to be able to or that would involve a degree of self-mutilation. But, most importantly, this demand is presented in a way that makes it difficult to reject. It is this strategy of pressuring someone into accepting a demand that we want to analyse.

It may already be clear why we call this strategy Tightlacing. Tightlacing refers to the practice of wearing corsets so tightly bound that they may eventually reshape the torso. This can produce an aesthetic effect that was at times considered desirable, but can also restrict mobility and lead to negative medical consequences, as the body is forced into an unnatural shape and the corset immobilises the body in this position.<sup>5</sup> We think that an analogous thing occurs in these examples. By way of a manipulative kind of normative address someone is demanded to behave in a way that is overburdening and unnatural for them, and because they find themselves pressured into accepting this, they are likely to suffer great harm. The next section explains this concept in more detail.

## 2. Tightlacing

We have discussed a set of examples that all involve an abusive form of normative address. We think that the abusive nature of the kind of address in these examples is explained by something rather subtle. We will focus on the CHILD AGGRESSION case to bring this out. The way the father addresses his son—though not in its explicit content—carries a substantive assumption about what his son is like and which demands can therefore legitimately be directed at him. He is addressed, we shall say, as a kind of being he is not. Specifically, he is being addressed as a kind of being who can perfectly control their emotions in response to rational demands and has no need to express them freely, and who is therefore the legitimate target of demands to control them according to other people's needs. This pressures him into adopting a mistaken self-conception and applying overburdening demands to himself.

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5. It is worth noting that these harmful effects seem to have been exaggerated by conservative male Victorian doctors and based on false assumptions about women's bodies. Nevertheless, there does appear to be evidence that tightlacing did have some negative health effects. As Valerie Steele (2005: 68) describes in her *The Corset: A Cultural History*, "From the perspective of modern medicine, corsets were extremely unlikely to have caused most of the diseases for which they were blamed. Yet they almost certainly did cause or aggravate some health problems."

It is this phenomenon of inducing a mistaken self-conception in order to license overburdening demands that we propose to call Tightlacing (in Section 3 below we will additionally attend to possible strategies to bring this about). We propose the following definition:

**TIGHTLACING:** intentionally or foreseeably inducing in someone a mistaken self-conception that licenses overburdening demands on them.

We think of this as a success notion: if someone's Tightlacing strategy is not successful, they merely *attempted* to tightlace their victim, but did not *actually* tightlace them. Here, we follow Joel Rudinow's approach to manipulation, according to which one can try to manipulate someone else without being successful. As Rudinow (1978: 338) explains, this approach allows to distinguish between *manipulation* and *attempted manipulation*. Similarly, by making Tightlacing a success term, we can distinguish between *Tightlacing* and *attempted Tightlacing*.<sup>6</sup>

It is not only intentional and attempted Tightlacing that is wrong, however, engaging in conduct that foreseeably has a Tightlacing effect on victims can also be wrong, even when this is not done with the intention of inducing a particular self-conception in the victim. We therefore include in the definition of Tightlacing conduct that foreseeably makes victims internalise a mistaken self-conception that licenses overburdening demands on them, whether or not this was intended by anyone. A person is tightlaced by another if they internalise a mistaken self-conception licensing overburdening demands on them as a result of another's conduct that intentionally or foreseeably caused this effect.

Tightlacing thus does not need to result from disrespectful motivations and there may be occasions where tightlacers are not blameworthy. This does not change the fact that Tightlacing (and attempted Tightlacing) are wrongs that the victim can complain against because it is conduct that aims at and/or effects the particular kind of wrong we discuss below. By contrast, we exclude from the definition of Tightlacing conduct that only accidentally causes a Tightlacing effect due to the victim's unforeseeable dispositions. In such cases, the conduct causing this effect seems permissible rather than wrongful and, despite its negative effect, not something the victim can complain against.

We choose this perspective because our focus in this paper is on Tightlacing as a wrong that victims experience. A different approach to the phenomenon would be to focus on the way in which culpable tightlacers target their victim, that is, the particular way in which culpable tightlacers are disrespectful of their victims. This approach would highlight how typical tightlacers knowingly or

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6. This does not mean that only successful Tightlacing is wrong. Attempted murder, attempted assault and attempted arson are all wrong despite being unsuccessful. The same is true for attempted Tightlacing. See also Stark (2019: 233, endnote 10), for the same point concerning Gaslighting.



recklessly induce a self-conception in their victims that they know to be false or have no reason to think is correct.<sup>7</sup> We think that both are valuable perspectives on Tightlacing, but, for the purposes of introducing the phenomenon, decided to focus on Tightlacing as something that victims find themselves subject to as a result of conduct they could complain against, whether this conduct was culpable or not. This, we think, also increases the concept's critical potential as it includes cases where victims find themselves tightlaced by innocuous or well-meaning others. Part of our ambition is to provide the hermeneutical resources for such victims to complain about their treatment even where, precisely because these hermeneutical resources were lacking, their tightlacers were not aware of the objectionable nature of their conduct, and also where they act in good faith but are non-culpably mistaken. This includes tightlacers who believe the self-conception they induce in their victims is correct as well as tightlacers who are not aware they are inducing a self-conception in their victims.

Consequently, Tightlacing can be excused as well as more or less culpable and more or less severe. Also, there is room for benevolent Tightlacing: a parent may believe that their child needs to ensure that they act in certain ways in order to prosper. The abbot may believe that the monk needs to comply with the demands of celibacy in order to flourish and fulfil his vocation as a monk. It is imaginable (though unlikely) that post-war Germans sincerely thought it was beneficial for survivors to "get over" what happened, and your moralistic colleague may believe tightlacing you is justified because of the moral values at stake in your conduct. Such motives will be relevant to moral assessments of the tightlacer but will not fully determine this assessment. While we suspect they will be rare, there may be occasions where Tightlacing can bring about sufficiently good results as to make it a morally permissible course of action. More generally, it seems reasonable to think that all else being equal, a tightlacer with benevolent intentions is less blameworthy than someone who tightlaces maliciously. Nevertheless, a tightlacer with benevolent intentions may do considerable harm to the person they tightlace and their actions may constitute a serious wrong.

Having thus introduced the concept of Tightlacing, let's now attend to the two parts of its definition: the induction of a mistaken self-conception and the apparent licensing of overburdening demands.

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7. Stark (2019: 224–25) has argued similarly for Gaslighting when she claims that Gaslighting occurs if the claims the gaslighter confronts the victim with are unjustified both objectively and from the gaslighter's perspective. Such an approach frames Gaslighting as a particularly disrespectful targeting of someone and implies that Gaslighting is almost always culpable.

We thank an anonymous referee for pointing out the potential of this way of thinking about both Gaslighting and Tightlacing, and we think this is an important topic for future research.

### 2.1. Mistaken Self-Conceptions

The father's harsh moralising response to what may be an annoying but nonetheless very normal emotional outburst from a child tacitly communicates more than it explicitly says: the child is addressed as someone who can perfectly control their emotions and has no need to express them freely, and who is therefore the legitimate target of demands to control them according to other people's needs. This, of course, is a misrepresentation of the affective nature of children, and indeed any human being. Human beings have an affective nature that is only partly under their control and, as Srinivasan (2018: 136–38) has convincingly argued, it is natural that emotions are at least partly expressed. This is especially true for children who are still learning to control their emotions.<sup>8</sup>

The father thus introduces into the conversation a mistaken conception of his son's nature. While he does not voice this message, and may even deny it if confronted, it is tacitly involved in the way he addresses his son. In the next section, we will explore *how* this address is tacitly communicated. Our focus now is on the *content* of the message and what it does to the addressee. The father communicates that the son's affective nature itself is a problem and that any expression of emotions threatens to commit a grave wrong. This message will be all the more obvious if this kind of conversation happens repeatedly in the family. If, as seems likely, the son also comes to adopt this view of himself, his father will have succeeded at inducing in his son a self-conception that is mistaken. The son will think of himself as someone capable of perfectly controlling his emotions and thus operate on a mistaken view of his capacities.

Note that for Tightlacing to occur the self-conception induced need not be wrong in virtue of a mistaken assumption about human nature in general; it suf-

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8. Note that it doesn't matter for whether this is Tightlacing whether the victim might change such as to adapt to the mistaken conception of them. Imagine the devil offers Francis the monk a pill that can turn him into a non-sexual being. If he took the pill, the abbot's demands would not be tightlacing him anymore, as they would then rest on the true assumption that Francis has no sexual needs. As long as he does not take the pill however, the abbot's demands are Tightlacing because Francis is addressed on a mistaken assumption about his nature.

Similarly, as Bernard Williams (1995) pointed out, blame often functions as a proleptic mechanism. This means that in blaming someone we may address them as if they already recognise the reasons why they should not have acted as they did, even when we know this may not be the case. In doing so, we aim to bring about this awareness. Treating someone as if they recognize the reason can help to foster their awareness of this reason (Fricker 2016: 176). This is a borderline case. The addressee is addressed on a false assumption about them, but the (repeated) address serves to realise this assumption. It seems like in such cases the addressee is not being tightlaced for they are not manoeuvred into a situation where they apply overburdening demands to themselves but rather into a situation where these demands are not overburdening anymore given that their nature has changed. If, on the other hand, one's attempts at proleptic blame failed and no such development occurred, but one continued to blame, one would then be tightlacing the addressee.

fices that it is incorrect with respect to the person targeted. It would not change the character of the scene if most children were found capable of controlling their emotions in the way demanded but not this child, nor if the father's implied view was that children are generally allowed to be angry but not this one.<sup>9</sup>

A similar message is present across our other examples. Améry and his fellow survivors are being addressed as people who could simply decide to abandon the resentment they feel in response to the holocaust. Francis the monk is addressed as someone who is capable of experiencing celibacy as a form of self-realisation rather than a burden. The moralistic colleague addresses their target as someone capable of living up to maximally high moral standards at all times and without difficulty.<sup>10</sup> In all these examples, people are encouraged to accept a mistaken self-conception. What is morally problematic and potentially abusive about this comes out once we attend to the second aspect of Tightlacing: that this mistaken self-conception licenses overburdening demands.

## ***2.2. Licensing Overburdening Demands***

The mistaken self-conceptions that people are encouraged to adopt through Tightlacing serve a purpose: they underpin overly burdensome demands made of the targets. These demands are ones that would be reasonable *if* the mistaken self-conception were accurate.

In our main example, the father introduces the assumption that his son has no uncontrolled affective nature for a purpose: on this assumption, it is reasonable to demand that he fully control his emotions and not to show signs of annoyance. These demands concern both the son's emotional states and his behaviour. The father has a strong desire to avoid this behaviour on the son's part—why else would he respond to it with such force—and his chosen strategy is to declare it immoral. Introducing said assumption about his son is a central part of this strategy: it serves to license his demand, making him seem reasonable, and putting pressure on his son to comply. Similarly, in *GENOCIDE SURVIVOR*, the idea that survivors could simply decide to abandon their resentment underpins the demand that they should abandon their anger or at least stop expressing it in public. Francis the monk is addressed as someone who

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9. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pushing us to clarify this point.

10. We noted earlier that MORALISM may seem less abusive than our other examples. We believe this is because MORALISM is less likely to successfully induce this self-conception in the addressee, partly because there is no power relation between addresser and addressee. We nonetheless think that this is tightlacing behaviour because it may, depending on the victim's disposition, be apt to tightlace them. If the addressee is merely annoyed and does not internalise a mistaken self-conception, no Tightlacing occurred.

can easily give up his sexual desires in order to make the demand that he accept his celibacy without trouble and without need for help appear reasonable. Similarly, the moralistic colleague addresses people as though they were capable of living up to maximally high moral standards at all times in order to make his moral demands seem appropriate. These Tightlacing demands concern different parts of their target's agency: they are demands that target a person's actions, emotions, or desires, and any instance of Tightlacing may target one or more of these aspects of agency.

The victims in our examples, then, are not only encouraged to accept mistaken views about their own nature, but this is being done because it licenses making overburdening demands of them. The victims are represented as beings who can legitimately be demanded to avoid certain behaviours that, given a realistic view of their nature, are natural and permissible. We need not assume that it is impossible for the victim to meet those demands. Indeed, Tightlacing can be a very successful way to get victims to comply with them. The son from CHILD AGGRESSION is likely to start suppressing his emotions and consequently behave exactly as his father wants him to. The function of Tightlacing is to suppress kinds of behaviour on the victim's part, and so at least some of the demands it introduces must be such that they can be complied with. They rest on a mistaken conception of the victim's nature not in the sense that the victim *cannot* possibly fulfil them, but that given the victim's actual nature they are so overburdening and complying with them is so harmful that they cannot possibly be seen as justified. The role of the assumption the tightlacer smuggles in, then, is to make unreasonable demands appear justified and get their victim to apply them to themselves.

### 3. Tightlacing Strategies

We have outlined what we take to be going wrong in the four examples we examined in Section 1. These are all instances of Tightlacing, the inducing of a mistaken self-conception that licenses overburdening demands. But how do tightlacers manage to induce this mistaken self-conception in others? We will now explain common (and often overlapping) strategies that tightlacers may adopt to achieve their goal. These strategies are not essential elements of Tightlacing, they are simply typical strategies that tightlacers may use to bring about the mistaken self-conception in their target. Nevertheless, attending to how these strategies enable Tightlacing makes it clearer that this is a correct analysis of the examples set out in Section 1. By raising awareness of these common strategies, we hope to provide tools that can help people to recognise when someone may be trying to tightlace them.

We should be clear from the start that these strategies are certainly not bullet-proof. Nothing in principle prevents the addressees from calling their addressers out on their mistaken assumption and deflecting their demands or, if prudential, complying with the demands but rejecting them internally. However, in our examples we encounter three strategic features that give tightlacers a good chance of succeeding. These are (1) the abuse of normative address, (2) introducing substantive assumptions by way of presupposition, and (3) exploiting the victim's weaknesses.

First, Tightlacing often involves direct normative address towards victims. In our examples this happens in the guise of demands and blame. This a powerful Tightlacing strategy, as it exploits the *prima facie* authority of moral address. As ethical theorists have often noted, making demands of one another and holding each other responsible are practices that rest on a kind of normative authority members of the moral community grant each other. We accord others the right to make moral demands on us and typically take seriously the demands and accusations that others make against us. Borrowing from Stephen Darwall's discussion of a different way of abusing normative relations (namely, coercion): even illegitimate demands "purport[] to create reasons in something like the way that legitimate claims and demands do, namely second-personally, but without the appropriate normative backing [ . . . ]" (2006: 51). Tightlacers exploit this *prima facie* authority. They pretend to engage (sometimes maybe even believe that they are engaging) in an ordinary moral exchange and capitalise on their victims' receptiveness to such address and their trust in the good faith of their interlocutors.<sup>11</sup>

We think that such normative address is the paradigmatic form of Tightlacing. We suspect that most instances of Tightlacing will function by directly addressing the victim with the demands the tightlacer wants them to accept. A slight variation of this might involve praising victims for meeting those demands ("It is great that you are so in control of your anger"). Likewise, rather than normatively addressing the victim, tightlacers may comment insistently on third parties in the victim's presence ("Look how well this kid deals with annoying situations").

It should be noted that the explicit demand made in such address need not be illegitimate for it to count as Tightlacing. It suffices if this demand is made in a way such that it implies assumptions about the addressee that would license additional, illegitimate demands. This may be the case in MORALISM: none of the colleague's expectations is illegitimate but his uncompromising way of making them suggests that meeting all these expectations should be a matter of

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11. This echoes what Abramson (2014: 15) and Spear (2019: 9, 2020: 230, 232n10) say about the interaction between Gaslighters and their victims.

course, whereas for someone with normal human capacities it will, even if possible, always be a struggle. The colleague's behaviour thus suggests a view of their addressee that licenses demands on them not only to comply with moral demands but to do so easily and without any failures. These demands are illegitimate, however, and so even making legitimate demands may tightlace someone if it makes them internalise a view of themselves that licenses additional, illegitimate demands.<sup>12</sup>

The second strategic feature we encounter in our examples is presupposition. This is a powerful way of making someone adopt a point of view they might otherwise reject. The victims in our examples are addressed with a superficially plausible demand that presupposes a substantive and mistaken assumption about their nature. It is by way of this assumption, hidden behind seemingly reasonable and authoritative address, that the victims are pressured towards a self-conception that licenses overburdening demands on them.

We suggest that the father's demand addresses his son in such a way that introduces the presupposition that the son can fully control his affective nature and has no need to express his emotions. It is the harshness of the father's reaction together with the absence of any sign of empathy or understanding that suggests this. The father does not say "I see why you're angry, but . . ." nor does he consider that his son's exaggerated response may be a sign of distress or some other source of anger. Rather, he signals that the son's behaviour is intolerable and that no further discussion is necessary to establish this. He reduces his son's expression of anger to a kind of behaviour, framing it as something fully under the son's control for which he can be held responsible. The presupposition of his blame is that expressions of anger are something the child can and must avoid. This message is reinforced by the gravity of the blame and the consideration cited (the mother's wellbeing). That the father one-sidedly ends the conversation and leaves his devastated son behind underlines the message that his demands are natural and that the son's ability to comply with them is beyond question.

Importantly however, the father does not directly assert this assumption, rather his address tacitly presupposes this much about the addressee and communicates this presupposition implicitly. As David Lewis (1979) points out, making an assertion in a conversation that requires some background presupposition in order to be accepted usually has the effect of smuggling this presupposition into the conversational common ground. For example, to say "even

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12. A similar case is how many people respond to paedophilia. Engaging in sexual behaviour with children certainly is wrong and anyone exhibiting such sexual urges can legitimately be demanded not to act on them. If, however, this demand is made sternly as if conforming with it were a matter of course, without acknowledging the difficulty this means and without offering help, it may suggest that suppressing such urges is easy and should be done without difficulty and without need for help. These expectations, however, are illegitimate.

George could win" in relation to some sporting contest presupposes the claim that George is untalented in the relevant sport. The fact that this claim is presupposed rather than asserted makes the claim harder to challenge, as in presupposing some claim a speaker suggests that this claim is common knowledge. This puts those who challenge this claim against not only the speaker but against all those who subscribe to this common knowledge (Langton & West 1999: 309).

In short, the father's address implies a substantive assumption about the son because the demands being made of him cannot be seen as reasonable without it. On a more realistic view of the affective nature of children the father's demands would be obviously unjustified. Thus, the father's demands could, in principle, be deflected by pointing to the wrongness of its assumptions. If, on the other hand, the son does not detect or challenge the assumption but engages with the address at face value (e.g., by apologizing, or by denying that his conduct affects his mother), he thereby also asserts the assumption. Presupposition easily tricks the addressee into accepting what is presupposed.

Of course, the father's address communicates its presupposition only if it receives uptake by his son. This communication plays a crucial part in explaining the wrong of such address. One can also blame a cat and thus address it as a responsible being (we may assume it not to be), but this will be morally innocuous precisely because this presupposition will not receive uptake—the cat will go unaffected. Importantly, however, there is no need for full or explicit uptake of the message. Very likely, the son from our opening example will not be explicitly aware that he is being addressed as a being with no uncontrolled affective nature. On some level (subconscious or not), however, he will likely get the message. The son is pressured into accepting this assumption about himself, and consequently also into admitting the legitimacy of his father's demands, because he introduces the assumption implicitly and abuses his relative authority as well as the *prima facie* authority of moral address. This makes it difficult for the son to question the demand or recognise it as inappropriate.

Analogous things could be said about our other examples: in each case, the tightlacer introduces a substantive assumption about their victim by way of presupposition. The implicit claim about the agency of the target would seem implausible or even ridiculous if stated explicitly. By introducing these claims through presupposition, the tightlacer makes it more difficult to assess or question their legitimacy.

Finally, tightlacers are likely to seek to exploit specific weaknesses they perceive in their targets to help bring about a false self-conception. This weakness may be that the target has strong reasons and/or inclinations to trust the tightlacer or defer to them. Parent-child relationships are obviously such a context, as are intimate relationships more generally. The same goes for hierarchical contexts: where victims have prudential reason to defer to their tightlacer

(e.g., an employee to their boss), it will be difficult to resist the Tightlacer's demands. The longer the tightlacing lasts, the more likely they are to internalise these demands—including the assumptions they rest on. Tentatively, emotional investment facilitates Tightlacing because the tightlacer's demands are con-founded with the terms of their relationship to the victim and the tightlacer's views appear especially important to the victim. Normative credence facilitates Tightlacing because the tightlacer's normative views appear especially credible. Hierarchical relations facilitate Tightlacing because the tightlacer's demands become practically inescapable and thus psychologically likely to be internalised. In Amery's case, it may have been the large number of Germans who seemed to endorse the view that holocaust survivors should forgive that made the strategy particularly forceful.

All these strategies are manipulative.<sup>13</sup> While there is no consensus on an exact definition of manipulation, it is widely accepted manipulation involves taking over another's decision-making capacity. As Susser et al. (2019) put the point, to manipulate someone is "to deprive them of authorship over their actions." Similarly, Benn and Lazar (2022: 139) describe manipulation as "undermining an individual's decision-making power [. . .] in order to change their behaviour." When someone is manipulated, their ability to determine their own behaviour is undermined. As Sarah Buss (2005: 195) describes, the manipulator undermines "the self-governed (and self-governing) activity we call 'making up one's mind about how to act'". Importantly, this decision-making capacity need not be fully undermined in order for manipulation to be taking place. Moreover, the decision-making capacity could be undermined in several different ways. According to Rudinow's (1978) influential account, manipulation is a form of influence that involves deception, pressure, or playing on the target's weaknesses.

The Tightlacing strategies we have described fall squarely into manipulation as described by these authors: first, smuggling assumptions about the victims' nature into the conversation by way of implicit presupposition is a form of deception. Rather than making these claims explicit and allowing the target to decide whether or not they endorse them, the claims are presupposed. This means that it will take significant cognitive effort for the target to detect and reject them.

Secondly, the tightlacers in these examples abuse normative language and the *prima facie* authority that accompanies it. This puts pressure on their victims to adopt the tightlacer's point of view. This double strategy—exploiting the authority of ordinary moral address while smuggling in distorting assump-

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13. We don't reject the possibility of non-manipulative Tightlacing. The common philosophical fantasy of a pill achieving a complex mental effect can be employed here, too. Nevertheless, we suspect that almost all real cases of Tightlacing will be manipulative in some way.



tions—attempts to manoeuvre their victims into accepting the assumptions about them, and consequently also the demands apparently licensed thereby. This puts significant pressure on the targets of this address to accept these demands.

Third, tightlacer's may exploit the victim's weaknesses as well as their own (perceived) relative authority. This may pressure their victims into deferring to them.

If a Tightlacing strategy succeeds, it will have achieved two things: (1) the victim has accepted and internalised the false assumption about their nature and (2) consequently views the demands the tightlacer makes of them as reasonable and attempts to comply with them. Tightlacing is a manipulative strategy to pressure the victim into complying with overburdening and unjustified demands—not by coercion, but by making the victim believe that these demands are legitimately directed at them. This seemingly legitimate application of overburdening demands *tightlaces* the victim into a position that is fitting only for someone with a different nature. The different Tightlacing strategies we have explained in this section are not exhaustive, but we hope that attending to these typical and often effective strategies supports our position that Tightlacing is a recognisable and attention-worthy phenomenon.

#### 4. Tightlacing and Gaslighting

Before articulating the specific wrongful character of Tightlacing let us make a brief excursus and compare this wrong to Gaslighting. Both are abusive ways of treating a person that undermine parts of their self-confidence. Gaslighting, as described by Abramson (2014), operates on an epistemic plain. Paradigmatically, it occurs when the victim makes a factual or normative claim the gaslighter not only disagrees with but cannot, for psychological reasons, allow to even be considered (by this person, at least). Gaslighters are typically motivated by an internal impulse to suppress this claim and make maximally sure the victim does not ponder it (Abramson 2014: 9–10). Gaslighters target the victim's trust in their own epistemic capacities. In cases similar to GENOCIDE SURVIVOR, the victim may find themselves confronted with constructed counterevidence, denials of their trustworthiness, manipulative reframings of the event, etc. As Beerbohm and Davis (2021: 3) put it, Gaslighting commonly works by providing higher-order evidence: gaslighters do not so much directly deny the claim they want to suppress, but rather present the victim with alleged evidence that their belief-forming mechanisms are faulty. Thus, while the gaslighter's aim is the suppression of a specific belief or piece of testimony, their strategy targets the victim's trust in their own epistemic capacities (Spear 2019: 6–10) and undermines their epistemic autonomy (Rietdijk 2021). Departing slightly from

Abramson's established use of the term, we believe it would be theoretically beneficial to distinguish between Gaslighting, taken to be behaviour that intentionally aims at undermining someone's epistemic self-trust, and the typical, though not necessary, motivation of gaslighters. While we agree that paradigmatic gaslighters will be motivated by a strong desire to prevent their victims from testifying to something, someone may engage in Gaslighting behaviour out of simple cruelty.

Now consider how Tightlacing works. In *GENOCIDE SURVIVOR*, Tightlacing occurs when Gaslighting (and other strategies) have failed to suppress the victim's claims and a shared evaluation of the past has been established (or was never at issue). Victim and tightlacer agree on the facts and how to evaluate them. What the tightlacers want to avoid is not the victim's claims but certain behaviour on the victim's part (e.g., refusing to be silent on the matter and to "move on"). What tightlacers aim to achieve is not that the victim lose trust in their epistemic capacities but that they feel like they lack the standing to engage in this kind of behaviour. This is achieved by manipulating them into accepting a self-conception as someone for whom such behaviour is unnatural or who can be normatively expected to avoid it, thus licensing demands to avoid this behaviour. Tightlacing does not provide higher-order evidence nor higher-order norms but changes the assumptions governing which norms may be applied. While successful Gaslighting makes the victim feel like they cannot trust their own experiences and beliefs, successful Tightlacing makes the victim feel like their natural behaviour is wrongful and that their inclination to such behaviour is immoral and manifests a vice.

In the respective paradigm cases, then, gaslighters and tightlacers have somewhat analogous aims. Typical gaslighters want to suppress an epistemic or evaluative perspective, and typical tightlacers want to suppress a kind of behaviour. Both are motivated by a strong psychological need to avoid exposure to this perspective or behaviour: because of the strength of this need, they do not target this as such but rather the other agent and specifically their epistemic self-trust and their entitlement to kinds of behaviour, as well as the identity that finds its natural expressions in such behaviour. As with Gaslighting, we believe that this distinctive motivation is merely typical for tightlacers but not constitutive of the wrong of Tightlacing. Tightlacing may be motivated by cruelty, or occur in the service of a religion or ideology.

Irrespective of the perpetrator's motivation, Gaslighting and Tightlacing are related wrongs, one targeting the victim epistemically, the other in a behavioural regard. Both centrally target the victim on a psychological level, aiming to undermine how they regard themselves: Gaslighting undermines the victim's epistemic self-trust, Tightlacing targets their basic sense of who they are and

their sense of entitlement to conduct themselves as who they really are.<sup>14</sup> As GENOCIDE SURVIVOR shows, these can also co-occur and both play a role in a comprehensive silencing strategy. Unlike Gaslighting, however, Tightlacing is not restricted to challenging the victim's confidence in epistemic matters but may target their sense of entitlement to any kind of behaviour (as MORALISM and CHILD AGGRESSION show).<sup>15</sup>

Both Gaslighting and Tightlacing are difficult to detect. Gaslighters are much harder to call out on their abuse of the truth than liars precisely because they are not concerned with the truth.<sup>16</sup> Analogously, it is hard for Tightlacing victims to reject their tightlacers' demands: once their tightlacers have successfully manipulated them into adopting a mistaken self-conception, these demands will appear all too reasonable.

While Gaslighting and Tightlacing strategies exhibit significant similarities and typical gaslighters and tightlacers seem to be similarly motivated, these kinds of wrongs also differ in what they do with the victim's perspective. Gaslighting is a strategy that aims at undermining the victim's epistemic self-trust. It downplays evidence and diffuses the victim's grasp of their experiences by questioning their reliability. Gaslighting is disorienting, sowing doubts, taking away certainties. Tightlacing, in some respects, is the opposite of this. Instead of making the victim feel uncertain and disoriented, it provides an excessive focus on an (unreasonable) standard the victim must meet. Instead of disorienting the victim, it over-orientes them toward an oppressive standard that is set to occupy their attention. The victim is not, as in Gaslighting, driven to consider them-

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14. We say a "really are" as those who internalize a false self-conception as a result of being tightlaced may feel that they are entitled to conduct themselves in line with who they *think* they are based on this false self-conception. What they lack is a feeling that they are entitled behave in line with how they actually are. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pushing us to clarify this point.

15. Stark (2019: 228f) seems to consider a strategy similar to Tightlacing as one of many Gaslighting strategies. After having argued that Gaslighting involves attributing a flaw to the victim such that their testimony is not credible anymore but viewed as resulting from this flaw (2019: 225), she discusses emphasis on how a wrongdoer may suffer from an accusation as one such strategy. Although the wrong is not denied here, the blame is shifted to the victim by claiming that they wrongfully insist on bringing up the issue in order to make their wrongdoer suffer. This case bears some similarities to GENOCIDE SURVIVOR.

We think Stark is wrong in considering this a Gaslighting strategy. On her own definition of it, this is not a case of Gaslighting because it is not aimed at making testimony appear groundless. Rather, the accuracy of the target's testimony is admitted while they are denied the right to make it. What is targeted, then, is a kind of behaviour, not the content of a claim. We think such cases deserve being discussed in their own right, and therefore distinguish between Gaslighting and Tightlacing. We admit, of course, that the line between Gaslighting and Tightlacing can get blurry when Tightlacing targets epistemic behaviour or communicates excessive epistemic requirements.

16. This point is inspired by an earlier draft version of Beerbohm and Davis (2021) though it does not feature in the published version of the paper.

selves incompetent. Instead, they are treated like the proper addressee of overly demanding standards. They are treated as competent, but thus also as accountable for failure to do as they are demanded.

## 5. The Wrongful Character of Tightlacing

We can now see the specific wrongful character of Tightlacing. Besides the obvious fact that it communicates an unreasonable demand to the victim, Tightlacing is a way of making another think about themselves in a mistaken way. They are manipulated into considering themselves to be a kind of being they are not and to apply standards to themselves that are unreasonable for beings like them. The defining harm of Tightlacing is that it makes the victim internalise a mistaken view of themselves and thus think of themselves as subject to unreasonable norms.

We therefore think of the first central wrong of Tightlacing as this: it makes the victim complicit in a denial of their rights. By means of inducing a mistaken view of themselves, victims are made to believe that they lack the standing to engage in types of behaviour that are natural to them and that they could not, on a realistic view of their nature, be asked to suppress. Tightlacing, thus, is not only a way of controlling someone's behaviour but additionally enlists them as enforcement officers for ensuring their compliance with what is demanded of them.

Recalling the son from CHILD AGGRESSION, it is unreasonable to demand that he fully control his anger. Expressing one's feelings is natural for human beings, and for children in particular, and they therefore possess a general right to do so. In Tightlacing him his father not only denies this right but also makes his son complicit in this denial. Victims of Tightlacing internalise overburdening demands and enforce them on themselves. This makes them innocently complicit in their tightlacer's denial of their rights.

The wrongfulness of Tightlacing goes further, however, and includes a second characteristic wrong: in being subjected to norms that are justifiable only for agents with different characteristics their nature is denied. They are treated as beings they are not and demanded to conduct themselves as such. Tightlaced individuals are not only demanded not to enact their needs, desires, vulnerabilities, and (in)capacities (as may at times be justified); they are treated as if they did not have this nature. What they are really like has no role in these interactions, they are erased as beings entitled to act in certain ways. Furthermore, by being made to internalise such a view of themselves and of what can be demanded of them, they are made complicit in the denial of who they are, both in relation to others and to themselves, and the subsequent erasure of them as who they are.

Tightlaced individuals are made complicit in a denial of their rights as well as a denial of who they are and an erasure of their real nature. They are thus denied both their sense of entitlement to conduct themselves in legitimate ways and an appropriate conception of who they are.

These primary wrongs are typically accompanied by other wrongs. Most, perhaps all, Tightlacing strategies rely on manipulation and so inherit manipulation's wrong-making features. Besides, Tightlacing will often happen within hierarchical contexts or intimate relationships and will involve an abuse of the power and/or vulnerabilities these contexts provide. Generally, Tightlacing is hegemonic in that it one-sidedly enforces the tightlacer's view of appropriate behaviour that denies the victim the leeway to live according to their own needs.

Moreover, the tightlacer typically delegates the need to deal with their own needs to the victim. Since they can, for whatever psychological reason, not cope with a kind of behaviour, they make the victim avoid this behaviour at whatever cost. Instead of engaging with their own deficiencies and finding a way to navigate their lives, tightlacers assimilate their victims to their needs. They present themselves as normal, rational, and innocuous, making their victims feel that they pose a problem, while in fact it is the tightlacer whose expectations are unreasonable. They are delegitimizing their victims and what is normal for them in order to one-sidedly enforce their terms of the relationship. This also makes both parties unable to have an open discussion about their respective needs and the adequacy of their demands.

Beside these wrongs, there is the manifest harm done to victims of Tightlacing who will be bound to struggle with the overburdening demands they have been made to accept. Since they appear justified to them, Tightlacing victims will try to comply with them, but given that they are reasonable only for beings with different traits, this struggle will often fail. The son from CHILD AGGRESSION is bound to consider his emotions and the natural impulse to express them unreasonable and to be overcome. We can easily imagine him suppressing significant parts of his emotional life, and this having a grave impact on his mental health and his relationships with others. Despite such efforts, he will almost certainly fail to fully control his emotions and will therefore regularly feel guilty and immoral for failing to behave as he believes he should. He will likely experience alienation and lack of self-respect and self-confidence, and will continue not to feel entitled to engage in what is normal behaviour. His struggle with the bizarre, internalised view of which moral demands he must comply with will thus have two parts: partly he will succeed at suppressing his emotions, doubtlessly at great harm to himself. And partly he will fail, giving rise to a persistent sense of being deficient and immoral. Needless to say, this disposition will make him even more emotionally vulnerable and susceptible to further manipulation.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have introduced a hitherto unnamed type of psychological abuse: the induction of a mistaken self-conception in another such that overburdening demands on them seem justified. We called this type of wrong Tightlacing, invoking the image of its victims being forced into a normative corset not fitting their actual nature. We have identified a specific misuse of normative address as the paradigmatic form of Tightlacing: the victim is targeted with moralised and superficially legitimate demands that rest on a substantive and mistaken assumption about the victim's nature. Such address, when successful, manipulates the victim into accepting this assumption and applying the corresponding demands to themselves. This potentially results in a number of significant harms, both moral and psychological. There are two central wrongs of Tightlacing. It denies the victim's rights and makes them complicit in this denial and its enforcement. And it denies the victim's nature, and makes them complicit in this denial and the subsequent erasure of who they are. Tightlacing shows certain parallels to Gaslighting but differs from it in that it does not target the victim's epistemic self-trust but their basic sense of who they are and their sense of entitlement to conduct themselves as who they really are. By identifying, naming and analysing Tightlacing we hope to have enriched our understanding of psychological abuse in a way that can contribute to combatting it when it occurs.

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