Abstract

In The Struggle for Recognition (1995), Axel Honneth offers an anthropologically derived model of socialisation that maps out three spheres of recognition, love, rights and solidarity. In doing so he aims to explain and justify the importance of social relationships to the development and maintenance of a person’s identity. In setting down the three principles of recognition, Honneth has worked toward providing a theory for normative and social change; through the spheres of love, rights and esteem he has outlined the conditions of interaction within which human beings can feel confident of attaining a state of personal dignity and integrity. He has set out a complex theory that anchors one’s relationship to oneself in the positive modes of self-confidence, self respect and self esteem.

The following discussion examines Honneth’s account of the emergence of the ‘me’ as being distinct from the ‘I’ through his adoption of English psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott’s empirical studies of object relations theory; it summarises the three forms of recognition which Honneth differentiates, and considers the relevance of the theory of recognition to the socially and culturally gendered and embedded nature of care-work. Society has come to rely and depend on care-work without noticing the extent of its contribution to social life. It is argued that until a principle of care or affection is reconfigured as instrumental to the normative foundations of a theory of recognition, care-work and the people performing it will be disrespected through the denial of their relevance to the contribution of ethical life.
Mutual recognition is the most fundamental type of social interaction. Every day we are necessarily placed in positions where our conversations, approaches, questions and the responses to them become meaningful exchanges, enabling interaction and thus an understanding and awareness of ourselves and our relationship to others in society. In *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, Axel Honneth (1995) makes the case for a normative social theory of recognition that emphasises “not the struggle for self-preservation but rather the struggle for the establishment of relations of mutual recognition, as a precondition for self-realization” (Anderson, 1995: x), that is, we come to know ourselves through the acknowledgement of others.

I like to think of Honneth’s account of mutual identification in terms of the stranger in an unfamiliar country. When you enter a country where the language and culture is unfamiliar, the ensuing struggle to be understood clearly and to easily communicate your needs or desires becomes glaringly obvious. We are left to rely on a pantomime of unspoken words, gestures, movements and body language, and are all too often left frustrated by the lack of mutual understanding and the knowledge that adaptation to a new environment is dependent on being understood by others. This example however only skims the surface of Honneth’s approach to intersubjective relations, rather than rest on the communicative paradigm, Honneth engages in a more anthropologically derived model of socialisation that maps out three spheres of recognition, love, rights and solidarity. In doing so he aims to explain and justify the importance of social relationships to the development and maintenance of a person’s identity. Drawing on the work of philosopher Georg W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) and social psychologist George Herbert Mead (1863-1931), Honneth’s intent is to show that the desire for recognition is so fundamental to individual self-realization that it is the motivating force behind social development. Underpinning Honneth’s theory is the distinction made by Mead between the ‘I’ and ‘me’, for Mead this division was a functional one as both necessarily relate to social experience, while Mead does give a detailed account of the separate characteristics he is unable to account for the emergence of the ‘me’, a task that is successfully attended to by Honneth. The following discussion will (1) examine Honneth’s account of the emergence of the ‘me’ as being distinct from the ‘I’ through his adoption of English psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott’s empirical studies of object relations theory, (2) summarise the three forms of recognition which Honneth differentiates, and (3) explain theoretically and on the basis of contemporary examples how individuals negotiate norms and values and thus gain recognition or are disrespected. In this instance, I have chosen to look at the role of women, as mothers, and the socially and culturally gendered and embedded nature of care work.

Progressive sociology is grounded historically, just as Mead drew significantly on the work of Hegel’s Jena period, Honneth in turn, constructs his theory of recognition by significantly drawing from the work of both scholars. Hegel proposed that ‘recognition’ takes three principal forms – interpersonal love, systems of formal rights, and judgements of social honour, for Hegel relationships of intersubjectivity precede the acquisition of knowledge. Mead sought a more pragmatic explanation to the question of the emergence of self-consciousness. His role was to “naturalize Hegel’s views on recognition- to extract from them the discourse of German metaphysics and supply them with ‘empirical’ content” (Levine, 1998: 620), he aimed to demonstrate that consciousness is not a given but is emergent. Mead’s practical social psychology advanced that each individual is continually involved in a succession of joint enterprises with others (play, role play), which form and shape his mind. For Mead the individual self is individual only because of its relation to others; through the individual’s ability to imagine the attitudes of others, his self becomes an object of his own
reflection, “the self as both subject and object is the essence of being social” (Coser, 1977: 338). The \textit{me} is a cognitive object, known only retrospectively and on reflection, being expressed through the organised set of attitudes of others which one assumes; the \textit{I} is the response of the being to the attitudes of others. Or more simply phrased, the \textit{me} is the adoption in the individual of the mores, codes and expectations of the community whilst the \textit{I} is the spontaneous reaction, the product of a non-reflexive response. Mead’s account is useful in that it illustrates how as pre-conscious subjects, we develop conditioned reflexes that associate our own action-impulses with sense-impressions deriving from both our own vocalisations and the responses and reactions of those around us.

As an approach grounded in the study of symbolic interaction, Mead’s account fails to demonstrate the emergence the ‘me’; in his philosophy, the self emerges through the process of social interaction with others and the conditioned responses we demonstrate through gesture and role taking form the basis of one’s social life. The essence of the self according to Mead is its reflexivity, the individual self is individual only because of its relation to others, and thus communication with others is seen as essential for self-awareness. In \textit{The Struggle for Recognition} (1995) Honneth points out that both Mead and Hegel “were in fact equally unable to identify accurately the social experiences that would generate the pressure under which struggles for recognition would emerge within the historical process”; Honneth addresses this issue systematically and offers an empirical consideration of the distinguishing features of the three forms of recognition, love, rights and solidarity.

Honneth argues that without the three forms of recognition, personal identity cannot be established. When successfully realized however, they are instrumental in the development of self-realisation; this positive relation-to-self is contingent on the corresponding spheres to love, rights and esteem of self confidence, self respect and self esteem. Recognition matters so much to us because our personal identity is dependent on it, our autonomy and individuality are necessarily challenged by forms of disrespect and it is only through the establishment of a positive relation to self that forms of disrespect can be attended to. It is this very basic question of how we develop and maintain self-confidence in our earliest days that occupies much of Honneth’s approach to the first form of recognition.

For Honneth, love relationships describe those where strong emotional attachments exist between small numbers of people; these are primary relationships such as friendships, intimate relationships and the bond between parent and child. We often think of the love relationship as being unconditional, a space where care, concern and nurture are freely given; in this sense love is perhaps the most fundamental form of recognition, preceding and pre-empting both rights and esteem. Recognition matters so much to us because our personal identity is dependent on it, our autonomy and individuality are necessarily challenged by forms of disrespect and it is only through the establishment of a positive relation to self that forms of disrespect can be attended to. It is this very basic question of how we develop and maintain self-confidence in our earliest days that occupies much of Honneth’s approach to the first form of recognition.
to ‘read’ or intuit the needs of the child from little other than cries and expressions becomes essential to their very survival. Such a relationship is reliant on a high degree of emotional and instinctive involvement and thus sets the conditions that can lead to the “successful form of emotional attachment to other persons” (Honneth, 1995: 96). Through interpreting love relations as a process of mutual recognition, Honneth considers the phases leading towards the construction of a healthy personality. The first phase, *symbiotic togetherness* commences immediately following the child’s birth; this period is defined by the absolute reliance of the newborn on the primary caregiver, ‘here, both partners are entirely dependent on each other for the satisfaction of their needs and are incapable of individually demarcating themselves from each other’ (Honneth, 1995: 99). This concept of symbiosis is reinforced through the sentiments of mothers who venture out for the first time without their newborns feeling like they’ve forgotten something or having the sensation that a part of them is missing. The second phase *relative dependence* is identified through the slowly developing sense of independence, where the child gradually becomes aware that the self is separate and distinct from his or her environment. In beginning to understand the routines of the home in relation to his personal needs, the child is able to occupy increasing periods of time without the total attentions of the mother. This period of relative dependency is the point at which the child’s capacity to form attachments is nurtured, depicting ‘the emergence, in the relation between mother and child, of ‘being oneself in another’ that represents the model for all more mature forms of love’ (Honneth, 1995: 100). The process leading to successful individuation and autonomy is complex, necessitating the gradual withdrawal from the symbiotic state. In order to facilitate this withdrawal, Winnicott observed that a degree of ‘dependency’ was transferred to a *transitional object*, such as a toy, dummy or security blanket. Coupled with the onset of some hostility toward the primary care giver, this phase becomes ‘the constructive means by which the child can come to recognise the mother, unambivalently, as an ‘entity in its own right’ (Honneth, 1995: 101). This delicate and shifting balance between ego-dissolution and ego-demarcation, alongside the establishment of trust provides the ‘enduring, intersubjectively reproduced basis for relationships of love and friendship with peers’ (Anderson, 1995: xiv).

Recognition in the sphere of love is characterised by shared conditions of responsiveness, encouragement, approval and appreciation between individuals. This type of embedded concern is demonstrated in the following comment from Australian aid worker Rebecka Delforce, regarding her late husband, “He was the most attentive partner; he guessed my every need before I even thought of it. Having an argument with Darren felt as safe as having an ice-cream” (Emerson, 2008: 7). The emergence of the ‘me’ is dependent on the conditions of love that allow an individual to flourish, “the positive attitude which the individual is capable of assuming toward himself if he experiences this type of emotional recognition is that of self-confidence” (Honneth, 1990: 253). For Honneth, the ability to confidently express one’s needs and feelings combined with a sense of security provide the necessary basis for the development of all further attitudes of self-respect.

Honneth’s work emphasises that it is only through the successful adaptation of the first form of recognition, *love*, that the subsequent forms of *respect* and *solidarity*, can be properly established, ‘for it is only this symbiotically nourished bond, which emerges through mutually desired demarcation, that produces the degree of basic individual self-confidence indispensable for autonomous participation in public life’ (Honneth, 1995: 107). In contrast to the form of recognition acquired through primary love relationships, the recognition of rights differs dramatically; where the former is distinguished by affective and emotional considerations, the latter is historically grounded and is primarily cognitive in character. The recognition of rights refers to the equal moral accountability of individuals within a community. In modern times, and in most western industrialised countries, one’s status,
position or birthright no longer has any bearing on the distribution of justice. Therefore the recognition of rights is not reflected through the person’s attributes but rather as an acknowledgement that the individual is a source of independent judgement, “she or he can enter contracts, has the ability to consent or not, can deliberate and vote on leaders and legislation and so on” (Young, 2007: 196). Rights therefore do not refer to the qualities or virtues of a person but rather to the fundamental claim for the legal recognition accorded to all members of a society, the legal system being an expression of the “universalisable interests of all members of society” (Honneth, 1995: 109) where exceptions and privileges are no longer accommodated. Through accepting and adhering to the laws of society, the functions of reciprocity become evident. In identifying the permitted parameters of behaviour and conduct limited by the rule of law, we are agreeing to abide with an established set of social and moral norms and values that have been deemed necessary for the continuation of a just society. Honneth considers that adult subjects “acquire, via the experience of legal recognition, the possibility of seeing their actions as the universally respected expression of their own autonomy” (118). Respecting autonomy implies independence in decision-making and the restraint from any control of others by force or manipulation. The obstruction or denial of the rights a person can legitimately expect society to fulfil, whether through exclusion or unjust treatment, often results in a threat against an individual’s integrity and self respect, or the ‘feeling’ that the subject “lacks the status of a fully fledged partner in interaction who possesses equal moral rights” (Honneth, 1990: 251). This form of disrespect becomes a violation of one’s intersubjective expectations and diminishes the confidence one needs to be recognised as a person capable of reaching moral judgements, as the philosopher Iris Marion Young notes “recognizing individuals as legal persons means granting them entitlements simply by virtue of being persons, and not due to family connection, occupation, or the satisfactory performance of activities” (Young, 2007: 196). Young considers in the struggle for recognition as conceived by Honneth, individuals not only need to be recognised on a personal and civil basis, that is, not only for who they are, but also for what they do. This particular mode of recognition is considered by Honneth in terms of social solidarity.

This third principle of recognition identifies that human subjects always need a form of social esteem (solidarity) that allows them to relate positively to their personal traits and abilities. Where the concept of legal recognition is bound up in the universalized or equitable distribution of justice the principle of social esteem is associated with the individualisation of achievement, and through achievement the identification of different forms of personal self-realization. Honneth accounts for the particularity of the principle of esteem evident in modern societies by grounding it against the concept of solidarity and social worth that provides a system of reference to the realization of societal goals, “the practical relation to self that such an experience of recognition allows individuals to attain is thus a feeling of group pride or collective honour” (Honneth, 1995: 127). Solidarity, or group pride, is thus characterised in the way people esteem each other’s contributions to a shared goal, through the ‘shared horizon of values’ that makes it possible to experience each other’s uniqueness as meaningful to collectively shared values and practice. In pre-modern societies a person’s status was measured in terms of honour, in modern social organisations, one is esteemed according to the development of their own abilities, talents and accomplishments. Yet while esteem in modern liberal societies is commonly conceived of through the work one does and how well it is done, it is also considered against the degree to which their achievement contributes to the social good. That is, modern society “increasingly rewards people according to their individual achievements in contributing to co-operative social life” (Young, 2007: 196). What happens though when one is not commended or acknowledged for their personal achievements or efforts, or when they are simply taken for granted? The negative
consequences resulting from the denigration or devaluation of achievements can result in the loss of honour, dignity and status, and hence, the loss of social acceptability and self-esteem. Such criticism robs the subject in question of the potential for taking a positive view of themselves and downgrades the social value of forms of self-realization. Through the experience of this type of disrespect one is ‘deprived of the form of recognition which is expressed in society’s approval of a type of self-realization only acquired through group solidarity’ (Honneth, 1990: 252).

In setting down the three principles of recognition, Honneth has worked toward providing a theory for normative and social change; through the spheres of love, rights and esteem he has outlined the conditions of interaction within which human beings can feel confident of attaining a state of personal dignity and integrity. He has set out a complex theory that anchors one’s relationship to oneself in the positive modes of self-confidence, self respect and self esteem. For Honneth, the structural basis for the various forms of recognition are reflected through moral considerations, ‘Morality, if understood as an institution for the protection of human dignity, defends the reciprocity of love, the universalism of rights and the egalitarianism of solidarity against their being relinquished in favour of force or repression’ (Honneth, 1990:256). As a framework for the interpretation of forms of various forms of injustice, one feels that his theory could be prefaced with ‘In an ideal world... ’ for Honneth projects a false sense of unity and cohesion to social formations and through sentimentalising family and other primary relationships, he only serves to obscure their implicitly complex nature. His theory places the family as the emotional foundation of society and ignores the extent to which the family is no longer “the exclusive locus for the reproduction of intimate relations” (McNay, 2008: 135). His account of family dynamics and the applicability of the object-relations theory to self-realization also overlook the extent to which the family and its transformation are conditionally reflected through historical, social and economic controls. With these critiques in mind the final direction of this paper will be to consider the conditions associated with motherwork and whether the struggle for recognition adequately addresses the opportunity for self-realization in this sphere.

Whilst Honneth does show sensitivity towards the denigration of women’s work, both within the home and in the form of paid employment, he fails to consider or appreciate the extent to which the gender system he criticises is “integral to the division between the principles of affection and achievement” (Young, 2007: 201). Honneth doesn’t really question what struggles for recognition in the family mean, he adopts the view of Hegel assuming that such affection is based on mutuality and complementarity, and the fulfilment of that union in the child. In The Struggle for Recognition, Honneth fails to account for the social recognition of motherwork and underestimates the capacity to apply the principle of esteem to unpaid care work. The philosopher Beate Rossler, in ‘Work, Recognition, Emancipation’ (2007) argues that motherwork demands a different form of social recognition than paid work, and that these forms of work cannot be seen as equivalent forms of socially necessary achievements (Rossler, 2007: 136). Rossler argues that while both motherwork and paid employment make equal contributions to the reproduction of societies as well as to promoting the underlying aim of recognition, that is, healthy identity development, it is only through participating in paid work that one is accorded social recognition. To support this claim she considers three normative elements of gainful employment, (1) that self-preservation is acquired through financial security and property acquisition, (2) self-realization is acquired through the value of work to personal worth, and (3) social-inclusion – where work is deemed a socially relevant achievement. What then, is acquired through motherwork? A consideration of the three forms of recognition highlights the asymmetrical relationship involved in care giving, “it is difficult
to see what equality in care means, because care relations involve a kind of asymmetry
inimical to the spheres of rights and esteem” (Young, 2007: 206). Young notes that in ‘an
ideal world’ the principles of rights and esteem should include everyone, yet rights of women
within the domain of the private home are notoriously difficult to apply and esteem is denied
because of the existence of unjust gender specific divisions of labour in liberal societies,
“because work in the family is not recognised as socially relevant work” (Rossler, 2007: 156).
Through a reading of biographical accounts and memoirs of women involved primarily in
motherwork, one can identify several shared areas of concern, such as the meaninglessness
and mundane nature of housework, the constant repetition of tasks, the social isolation of
home based work and the lack of adult companionship and communication. The problem is
however, that the struggle for recognition of motherwork is, in Honneth's theory of
recognition “conceptualised only as a struggle for recognition of socially relevant
achievement – and as an achievement that should be financially recognised” (Honneth &
Fraser: 2003), as one knows, motherwork is not reimbursed financially so the question is, can
motherwork rightfully be assessed under the principle of achievement? I think not as, (1) it
provides no material or financial gain and therefore no scope for self-preservation, (2) the
work, through being unpaid and asymmetrical in nature fails to confer ‘value’ or ‘self-worth’
on the subject, thus limiting the scope for self-realization and (3) the isolated existence of the
homemaker and the nature of housework deny the subject social recognition.

Honneth’s principle of esteem implies that when “achievement (work) as such is not
recognised, or only inadequately and inappropriately, identities, individual personalities, are
impeded in their healthy development and social conflicts arise” (2003: 153). That the
principle of esteem fails to address the fundamental essentialism of care-based work suggests
that people involved significantly in the care and maintenance of family and home have been
denied recognition and are thus disrespected. In subsequent works Honneth has attempted to
redress this issue but believes that an important basis for the persistence of gender-based
inequality lies in a division of labour that assigns women primary responsibility for attending
to the material and emotional needs of men and children (Fraser & Honneth 2007; Young
2007; McNay 2008). The late Iris Marion Young considered that Honneth underestimated the
ease of according esteem on unpaid motherwork and as such, “theory of the recognition of
love’s labour can do more to envision a conception of esteem that does not measure people’s
achievements in these ways” (Young, 2007: 211). Society has come to rely and depend on
care-work without noticing the extent of its contribution to social life, until a principle of care
or affection is reconfigured as instrumental to the normative foundations of a theory of
recognition, care-work and the people performing it will be disrespected through the denial of
their relevance to the contribution of ethical life.

References

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