

On recognition and respect: Honneth, intersubjectivity and education

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Abstract

While relatively unknown in education circles, the work of Axel Honneth, Director of the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt (site of the famous Frankfurt School), is starting to gain prominence in Sociology, Political Science and Philosophy. The interest in his work revolves primarily around his theory of recognition, and how it situates itself in comparison to other theorists such as Charles Taylor and Nancy Fraser. In summary, these theorists argue that the drive towards personal autonomy can only be achieved intersubjectively – through the process of recognition from significant others.

This shift away from the atomistic tradition in philosophy allows Honneth to explore traditional Frankfurt School themes like individual freedom within a relational context, leading him to develop an elaborate theory of social justice and conflict. Most importantly it provides him with a normative grounding upon which to build a distinctive version of critical theory, one which connects everyday human concerns about identity and respect to broader struggles over exclusion.

*The purpose of the current paper is to explore how such an expansive social theory could be applied to the field of education. In particular, the paper will examine the significance for teaching and learning of his core ideas on identity formation - self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. The argument will draw on two key works: *The struggle for recognition: the moral grammar of social conflicts* (1995); and *Disrespect: the normative foundations of critical theory* (2007).*

Introduction

Through publications such as *The struggle for recognition: the moral grammar of social conflicts* (1995) and *Disrespect: the normative foundations of critical theory* (2007), the work of Axel Honneth, Director of the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt (site of the famous Frankfurt School), is starting to gain prominence in sociology, political science and philosophy. At one stage a student of Jürgen Habermas, he shares with his former teacher a commitment to continuing and updating the core activity of critical theory – namely to develop coherent theoretical analyses of modern sources of conflict that can be appropriated by those engaged in social change.

The current interest in Honneth's work revolves primarily around his contribution to this praxis-oriented version of social science and social philosophy. This takes the form of a theory of *recognition*, a comprehensive and paradigm-shifting approach to re-connecting the micro and macro, agency and structural levels of social thought. Developed over at least two decades, the work of Honneth on recognition finds strong parallels in the work of other

prominent theorists such as Charles Taylor (1995) and Nancy Fraser (2000). In summary, recognition theorists argue that the drive towards personal autonomy and self-realisation can only be achieved intersubjectively – through the process of recognition from significant others.

This shift away from the atomistic tradition in philosophy allows Honneth to explore traditional Frankfurt School themes like individual freedom within a relational context, leading him to develop an elaborate theory of social justice and conflict. Most importantly it provides him with a normative grounding upon which to build a distinctive version of critical theory, one which connects everyday human concerns about identity and respect to broader struggles over exclusion.

However, this important contribution to social theory, one that seeks to break new and impressive ground in our understandings of social behaviour, human need and sources of transformation, has been explored only fleetingly in the field of education.ⁱ The purpose of the current paper is to attempt to rectify this to some degree, and explore how such an expansive social theory could be applied to the field of education. In particular, the paper will examine the significance for teaching and learning of his core ideas on identity formation - self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem.

Honneth in the context of critical theory and social philosophy

As well as being a former student of Habermas, he also succeeded him as Professor of Social Philosophy at Frankfurt. It is no surprise then, that his work has developed to some degree in the shadow of the theorist Bernstein called the “philosopher of democracy” (1991: 207). In order to understand the context of Honneth’s work, then, it may be useful to briefly detail the relevant aspects of Habermas’ work, given that this is a key springboard for Honneth’s own objective in re-shaping the focus of critical theory.

In key texts such as the *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984; 1987), Habermas developed a complex multi-layered analysis of modern societal development and its discontents. He is recognised for the way his theory of communicative action re-shaped the concepts of previous ‘grand theorists’, such as Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Talcott Parsons. As well as incorporating their ideas, he also focused on the works of such diverse thinkers as Kohlberg and Meadⁱⁱ, in his efforts to develop a theory of society which linked both action and structural elements of societal integration.

In order to arrive at this overarching theory of societal evolution, Habermas made, alongside numerous other continental philosophers, a shift from the philosophy of consciousness to the philosophy of language. This key development was highly significant for his ‘diagnosis of the times’: it allowed him to argue that capitalist modernisation ushered in a one-sided process of rationalisation, one that emphasised instrumental rationality at the expense of communicative rationality.

In a similar fashion to Habermas, Honneth has moved away from the philosophy of consciousness and the isolated notion of the self. He has not, however, wholeheartedly adopted the focus on communication and language, developed into what Habermas terms a ‘universal pragmatics’. According to Freundlieb (2000: 86) Honneth views the work of Habermas in this regard as suffering from “certain defects”. In an article entitled *The social dynamics of disrespect: on the location of critical theory today* (Honneth, 2007), he outlines what he sees to be the key ‘defect’ in Habermas’s work:

The normative presuppositions of social interaction cannot be fully grasped if they are defined solely in terms of the linguistic conditions of reaching understanding free from domination; rather, we must consider above all the fact that social recognition constitutes the normative expectations connected with our entering into communicative relationships. (Honneth, 2007: 71).

Honneth argues that what is needed instead of (or as well as) a theory of universal pragmatics, is a theory of moral and social recognition. It is “recognition as a morally responsible and socially valued person or, in the opposite case, social disrespect that is the crucial factor in the moral experiences subjects undergo when they communicate with each other” (Freundlieb, 2000: 262). His conception of recognition is designed explicitly to be a parading-defining notion, on the grounds of which “general normative principles of modern societies can be formulated” (Stojanov, 2007: 75).

Significantly, Honneth views the paradigmatic character of his theory as offering critical theory a viable future in the context of philosophy. According to him, his theory of recognition offers the best way to do this “as it established a link between the social causes of widespread feelings of injustice and the normative objectives of emancipatory movements” (Honneth, in Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 113). This was written in response to Nancy Fraser’s critique of his work, but it could be read just as much as a rebuttal of Habermas’s claims to have provided a sufficient normative grounding via his theory of communicative action.

Regardless of the relative virtues of recognition and communicative action, Honneth’s philosophical approach to social problems is very much in line with traditional critical theory, not least his commitment to illuminating people’s everyday lived experiences. This is why his appropriation of Hegel’s thought, to which his theory of recognition owes a great deal, stops short of his later philosophy. Hegel’s shift into idealism is for Honneth too much of a deviation from critical theoretical concerns, “taking the enquirer away from real-life experiences of humiliation, disrespect, love and the ethical life” (Houston and Dolan, 2007: 2).

Alongside this strong connection and commitment to critical theory, Honneth has also been explicit in his association with the tradition of social philosophy, the tradition that stretches at least as far back as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his *Discourse on the origin of inequality*. Honneth considers his recognition theory as aligned with the quest to re-invigorate the tradition of using philosophy to examine problems in society. In his paper *Pathologies of the social: the past and present of social philosophy*, he argues that critical theory should engage in diagnosing societal developments that can be viewed as “processes of decline, distortion, or even as ‘social pathologies’” (Honneth, 2007: 25).

Critical theory and social philosophy aside, there are a number of other significant aspects to Honneth’s work, and how it attempts to respond and build upon recent developments in philosophy, politics and social science. For one, he could be seen as someone who bridges the gap between what has come to be known as ‘recognition politics’ (Zurn, 2005: 89) – the likes of identity politics and multiculturalism, and what used to be known as political economy – the kinds of ideas generated by neo-Marxists and continued more recently in debates on neo-liberalism. As Zurn puts it (2005: 89), issues “concerning economic and cultural justice” are covered explicitly by Honneth’s overarching theory of recognition.

Another innovative approach taken by Honneth is his boundary-defying connections between the psychological and the sociological realms, both in terms of discipline boundaries and traditional gulfs between sets of ideas. This is not surprising, given that he understands identity formation (like Fraser and Taylor) as hinging “irrevocably on social relations that acknowledge and validate personal existence” (Houston and Dolan, 2007: 2).

Honneth on recognition and intersubjectivity

In contrast to Habermas, Honneth has gone back to the thought of Hegel, especially his early ideas, in order to build his overarching concept of recognition. What he does share with Habermas is an emphasis on the work of social psychologist, George Herbert Mead (1934). Together, Hegel and Mead provide much of the underpinning theoretical building blocks for Honneth’s switch to an emphasis on the intersubjective, a switch that provides crucial justification for Honneth’s belief that his theory of recognition represents a paradigmatic shift. As Anderson succinctly puts it in the introduction to *The struggle for recognition* (1995: xii)

[O]ne’s relationship to oneself ... is not a matter of a solitary ego appraising itself, but an *intersubjective* process, in which one’s attitude towards oneself emerges in one’s encounter with an other’s attitude toward oneself.

Crucially, within Honneth’s theoretical model, there are three types of relation to self, all of which are crucial to the development of identity and self-realisation. These are:

- Self-confidence: elementary level, context of family and love
- Self-respect: level of rights and solidarity
- Self-esteem: context of labour, societal recognition

Honneth developed this tripartite definition of self-relation from Hegel’s early work (Huttunen, 2007: 424) “where the person begins at the first level and gradually moves on to the higher levels.” It is important to note at this stage that Honneth’s broader political theory of recognition “depends on his psychology of recognition” (Thompson 2006: 20). In relation to the first level of recognition, an individual’s self-confidence is established in the relations of friendship and love. Key to the first level is the need for recognition of one’s own existence, i.e., that one has the right to exist. As Huttunen explains, this elementary form of recognition,

takes place in the primary socialization process within the family and within circles of other persons that one is close to. Through one’s very first contacts with one’s parents, one gradually achieves a basic level of trust. One learns to express one’s needs without the fear of abandonment. Love and friendship are the forms of recognition by which parents create basic trust. The experience of love and care is a precondition for the formation of an individual’s identity and morality (Huttunen, 2007: 425-426).

Such concepts as Donald Winnicott’s object-relations theory (1971), and Erik Erikson’s notion of basic trust (1980), both of which place strong emphasis on interpersonal relations, particularly in the primary interaction between mother and child, are utilised in his theory. Honneth uses them to support the notion that the first form of self-relation, in which a balance is achieved between ego-dissolution and ego-demarkation (a key stage in successful identity formation), provides the “enduring, intersubjectively reproduced basis for relationships of love and friendship with peers” (Anderson, 1995: xiv).

The development of this elementary form of self-relation is the bedrock of his theory of recognition: without it, there could be no development of more advanced self-relations: self-respect and self-esteem. As Thompson puts it (2006: 20), without love, “respect and esteem are impossible.” Importantly, Honneth recognises that, while the first form of recognition is vital to human existence, the second and third form of self-relation are products of historically changing relations. As Anderson (1995: xiv) states, the “ways in which both respect and esteem are accorded have undergone a significant historical transformation.” It is also important to consider the environments and situations within which the achievements of these various levels of self-relation take place, which are family (love), civil society (rights) and the state (solidarity) (Huttunen, 2007: 424).

The second level of recognition relates to the striving by the individual for self-respect, the experience of which enables an individual to view him or herself as a “subject with dignity and with moral autonomy” (Stojanov, 2007: 78). The development of self-respect means that a person in a community of rights “gains recognition as a legally and morally mature person” (Huttunen, 2007: 426). The opposite of such recognition is what Huttunen refers to as a ‘paternalizing’ attitude, “which denies the individual’s freedom of will, autonomy, and ability to work independently” (Huttunen, 2007: 426). Thompson (2006: 49) attempts to summarise Honneth’s thesis on the politics of respect, when he states that “respect can only be shown to others by treating them as bearers of rights; where rights do not exist, no respect is possible”.

The third level of recognition relates to the need for self-esteem. As Huttunen (2007: 426) puts it, self-esteem

is built through the respect one receives for one’s work. Here, it is essential that one is recognized for some work through which one expresses oneself. Only through self-directed and autonomous work can one perform one’s freedom of will. And only when one begins to work out of one’s own free will for a common good can one become respected in a community. Self-esteem means that one sees one’s work being acknowledged and recognized.

According to Thompson (2006: 76), Honneth’s understanding of self-esteem is that individuals have the opportunity to earn esteem if “their particular traits and abilities are in tune with the values of their society.” The allocation of social esteem enables a person to “articulate those personal features and capabilities” through which they can make a valuable contribution to social life, which in turn provides the basis upon which they can become worthy members of society (Stojanov, 2007: 78).

Distortion to these forms of recognition leads to three forms of *disrespect*, the term ‘disrespect’ importantly signifying the ‘denial of recognition’ for Honneth (1995: 131). These three forms of disrespect are summarised nicely by Thompson (2006: 162):

If I am maltreated, I will feel humiliated, and my self-confidence will be damaged. If I am excluded from citizenship, and denied the rights to which I am entitled, then my self-respect will suffer. If the way of life with which I associate myself is denigrated, then my self-esteem is at risk.ⁱⁱⁱ

In this regard, Honneth (1995: 13) argues that ‘negative concepts’ such as ‘insult’ and ‘humiliation’

are used to designate behaviour that represents an injustice not simply because it harms subjects or restricts their freedom to act, but because it injures them with regard to the positive understanding of themselves that they have acquired intersubjectively.

He goes on to suggest (1995: 131-132) that

because the normative self-image of each and every individual human being – his or her ‘me’, as Mead put it – is dependent on the possibility of being continually backed up by others, the experience of being disrespected carries with it the danger of an injury that can bring the identity of the person as a whole to the point of collapse.

The key societal problem, then, according to Honneth, is the experience of various forms of disrespect, based on various forms of mis-recognition.

Recognition and education: Potential contributions

While the above is only a brief overview of what amounts to a fairly complex body of work, it does hopefully highlight the innovation at the heart of Honneth’s attempts to overcome the schism between the personal and the social, the micro and the macro of social theory. What then for education? What implications might there be for those who work in the field of teaching and learning? There are a number of issues in this regard that might gain from the application of Honneth’s work on recognition. These include: the relationship between teaching and learning; the use of peer learning and peer assessment; and understandings of educational inequality.

Teaching and learning: the shift to an intersubjective frame of reference, if accepted, offers something of a challenge to the prevailing pedagogical model, particularly given its reliance on a philosophy of consciousness. A theory of recognition of the type Honneth proposes, could potentially allow for a shift away from current concerns over the significance or otherwise of teaching vis-à-vis individual learners (incorporating concerns over a shift to facilitative approaches to pedagogy), to an approach that sidelines the teacher-learner paradigm in favour of an intersubjective paradigm. Such a shift offers an alternative to the current long-standing focus on concepts like learning styles and motivational typologies. A shift to a recognition approach would allow for a new set of ideas and ‘techniques’ that could offer a way forward to a more effective approach to learning.

Peer learning and assessment: One of these ‘techniques’ could centre itself on the role of peers in the relationship between teaching and learning. Considering the importance of intersubjective relations at all levels of recognition, a pedagogical model that strongly emphasises the significance of the teacher-isolated learner relationship may not be up to the task of developing sufficient levels of self-respect and self-esteem. An alternative view would be to shift the onus of responsibility onto the context of peer relations, a context that might allow for the more positive aspects of peer pressure to exert their undeniable influence on attitudes towards the learning process. While clearly concepts and practices relating to peer associations are not new in the field of education, Honneth’s work could provide a level of *legitimation* previously unavailable to the profession.

Educational inequality: Issues of a pedagogical nature such as peer learning, while significant, should not be divorced from concerns over the role of education in fostering or alleviating social and economic inequalities. Honneth’s work could be seen as offering an

important contribution in this regard. A consistent theme in the literature over the years on educational attainment has been the interaction between various 'cultures' and the ethos and values fostered by the school environment. These cultures, whether defined by race, class, gender or other forms of identity, have gained prominence as ways of understanding patterns and differentials in educational attainment. A focus on the contexts of recognition and respect, therefore, might provide opportunities to explore the lived educational experiences of those who, for example, 'learn to labour'.

Conclusion

The implications for education identified above should be placed alongside contemporary discussions of the value of Honneth's work. There have been detractors, most notably in the worlds of social philosophy, critical and feminist theory. Most recently, Lois McNay, in her book *Against recognition* (2008), critiques Honneth on the grounds that his 'relational' view of self-formation and social conflict precludes more structural understandings of power. While not against notions of recognition per se, she argues that the work of Pierre Bourdieu offers a more effective sociology of power relations, compared to Honneth's re-constructed critical theory.

Another related criticism focuses on what some view as Honneth's 'psychologization' of social pathologies. Key among his critics in this regard is Nancy Fraser (2003), who argues that this approach leads to: a reduction of oppression to individual attitudes; an over-dependence on empirical information drawn from subjective perceptions; and an over-reliance on what she considers to be inherently sectarian perceptions of self-realisation (Thompson, 2006: 31-39).

Such critiques, however, have arguably done more to develop Honneth's work in the area of recognition and intersubjectivity, rather than detract from it. Evidence of such a trend can be found in the way Honneth actively collaborates with his major critics - see his work with Fraser in *Redistribution or recognition* (2003) for a good example. More recently, his book *Reification* (2008), offers up a recognition-oriented update of Western Marxism's most influential concept, while also providing generous space for critics such as Judith Butler and Raymond Geuss.

It should also be emphasised that a focus on psychological theories, as part of a broader social philosophy/theory, is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, theoretical engagement between psychology and sociology (among other social science disciplines) was actively encouraged in earlier generations of critical theory, an inter-disciplinary approach manifested in works such as *The authoritarian personality* and *One dimensional man*. As Thompson put it (2006: 40), the use of psychological theories is not a problem in itself, but rather 'unreliable' psychological theories. Effective cross-disciplinary theory should be pursued, particularly given its strong relevance to fields of practice such as education. The work of Honneth, whatever his critics suggest, has potentially an important role to play in this regard.

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ⁱ Interestingly, Honneth's work has recently achieved some visibility in the field of social work, which does suggest a level of applicability in areas of public sector professionalism. See the likes of Frogett (2004), Garrett (2005) and Houston (2008).

ⁱⁱ Mead, along with Hegel, is especially important in Honneth's work. As Honneth states himself (1995: 71), "nowhere is the idea that human subjects owe their identity to the experience of intersubjective recognition more thoroughly developed on the basis of naturalistic presuppositions than in the social psychology of George Herbert Mead."

ⁱⁱⁱ Zurn also offers a useful summary of the three forms of disrespect: "At the most fundamental level, when one's control over one's own body - one's physical integrity - is violated by physical abuse, torture, rape, etc., then one loses trust in the stability of one's basic identity and constancy of one's world necessary for a healthy sense of self-confidence. Secondly, one's chance for developing moral self-respect can be negatively affected through the systematic denial of rights bestowed on other citizens. Finally, one's self-esteem can be undermined by the denigration and degradation of one's way of life, for in these cases one's way of life is not receiving the social esteem necessary for a healthy understanding of one's unique capacities and achievements" (Zurn, 2005: 93).