Rethinking Misrecognition and Struggles for Recognition: Critical Theory Beyond Honneth

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Introduction

*Human integrity owes its existence, at a deep level, to the patterns of approval and recognition.*

- Axel Honneth

Considerations of the causes of and correctives for social injustice are increasingly vital topics. Social recognition plays a vital role in both social injustices and efforts to overcome and prevent them. Axel Honneth’s influential accounts of recognition and struggles for recognition contain important insights into these topics. Unfortunately, some of Honneth’s concepts are narrow and need expansion for them to be useful in considering social injustices and responses to those injustices. This book presents important and, to my mind, necessary correctives and additions to Axel Honneth’s view of recognition to give the concepts of recognition, misrecognition, and struggles for recognition more explanatory power. I seek to address problems within recognition theory by clarifying the roles of misrecognition and struggles for recognition in human behavior. Rethinking misrecognition and struggles for recognition can lead to a more robust and relevant critical theory.

Following Honneth and others, I accept that recognition is integral to individuals’ self-realization and to social justice, and I accept Honneth’s idea that struggles against injustice are often struggles for recognition. Those who seek justice seek not only material changes but also a change in their place in society. Workers striking for better pay and working conditions are also fighting for recognition of their needs, dignity, and moral right to just compensation for their labor. Women who have fought for the vote, property rights, equal pay, control of their bodies, and similar causes have been seeking a change in society’s recognition norms to include women as full members of society. The Black Lives Matter movement seeks not only the end of violence against blacks but also recognition as human beings. The movement’s name itself is an explicit appeal to recognition: They are seeking recognition that their lives also matter.

Recognition has been cast by some, most notably Charles Taylor and Honneth, as public political struggles between social groups, but recognition is also at the heart of

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interpersonal relations. Mutual recognition enables friendship, romantic partnerships, and other relations of care, but the guiding norms of recognition also facilitate less-personal relations by socializing us into our culture’s normative expectations for individuals’ roles and behaviors. The importance of recognition in individuals’ lives and in social justice movements makes it a vital element in social and critical theory. One of my main tasks in this book is to illuminate the foundational importance of interpersonal recognition in struggles for recognition.

This study will begin with Axel Honneth, harvesting his insights to craft a foundation for understanding injustice and struggles against it. This study also builds on that foundation and goes beyond Honneth’s conceptualizations. It opens up new possibilities for critical theory by focusing on the vital social roles served by intersubjective recognition. A number of excellent scholars have put forward improvements to Honneth’s conceptualizations, and this study seeks to advance the study of recognition a step or two further with some friendly amendments and corrections to Honneth’s work. My goal is to enhance the understanding of recognition and misrecognition so they are more useful in diagnosing and correcting social injustices. To do this, we need to build on Honneth’s ideas and go beyond the shortcomings of those ideas to craft a new critical theory of interpersonal relations.

Perhaps Honneth’s clearest summary of his project is this:

Essentially, my idea amounts to the hypothesis that all social integration depends on reliable forms of mutual recognition, whose insufficiencies and deficits are always tied to feelings of misrecognition, which, in turn, can be regarded as the engine of social change.  

Honneth has attempted to show that subjects’ experiences of misrecognition cause moral injuries, a psychological suffering that leads to feelings of moral indignation over having their intuitive notions of justice violated. Moral feelings of indignation are, Honneth claims, the motives for social resistance and rebellion that contribute to social change and moral progress. Honneth therefore calls for struggles for recognition to be the guiding

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thread of critical theory.4 In his oeuvre, he has developed a critical theory linking subjective moral experiences of suffering, intersubjectivity, and normative intent that attempts to avoid structuralism and totalizing analysis.

By “recognition” Honneth refers to “attitudes and practices by which individuals or social groups are affirmed in certain of their qualities.”5 There are two keys to Honneth’s concept of recognition. The first is that individuals are socialized into a lifeworld of recognition norms that denote what behaviors and contributions by human individuals should be honored and what behaviors should be censured. The second is that receiving recognition on the basis of these norms enables an individual to develop a positive relation-to-self, his or her sense of place in society, and most importantly his or her autonomy to be able to determine and realize his or her own desires and intentions freely. Thus, individuals desire and need to both receive and give recognition to achieve their ends in society. For Honneth, justice is linked very closely to how, and as what, subjects mutually recognize each other and to what extent society’s relations of recognition support intersubjective relationships of mutual respect6 and grant all members of society the opportunity to participate in institutions of recognition.7 Thus, Honneth’s view of justice extends beyond the distribution of labor and the distribution of resources while including them in the quality of social relations and the personal integrity of all members of society.8

A number of philosophers have criticized the concept of recognition in general and specifically Honneth’s use of it in social theory. To mention just a few: Nancy Fraser agrees with Honneth that recognition is central to critical theory but says Honneth has a monistic framework in which a properly differentiated account of recognition is all that is required for critical theory. She further charges that Honneth overextends the category of recognition to the point that it loses its critical force. Inflating that concept beyond all recognition, he transforms a limited but precise instrument of social criticism into a bloated and blunted catchall that fails to rise to the challenges of our time.9

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4 Honneth, The Struggle for Recognition, 144.
6 Honneth, Disrespect, 71, 130.
8 Fraser and Honneth, 177-183.
9 Fraser and Honneth, 201.
Lois McNay accuses recognition theory of binding agency too tightly to identity and relying on a reductive notion of power that neglects how social structures outside intersubjective interactions condition human experience.\(^{10}\) Danielle Petherbridge similarly argues that Honneth attempts to transform Foucault’s notion of power/struggle into a concept of recognition/struggle but that this move fails largely because he does not include an adequate account of power in his recognition theory.\(^{11}\) Patchen Markell criticizes recognition as an impossible and incoherent idea requiring a world of mutual transparency and invulnerable identities in which struggles for recognition are part of the problem rather than the solution of identity-based injustice.\(^{12}\)

Some of these critiques of recognition have merit, and I agree there are flaws in Honneth’s account; however, I still believe recognition is a highly useful concept if we can address its shortcomings. This study will amend recognition theory and answer some of its shortcomings through an analysis and rethinking of two important concepts: misrecognition and struggles for recognition. I believe that Honneth is correct about the importance of recognition in individuals’ lives, how the denial of recognition can motivate social resistance, and how that resistance can lead to normative change. I will show how Honneth’s conceptualizations of misrecognition and struggles for recognition are too general and therefore lack sufficient detail and clarity to explain social injustices and individuals’ responses to injustices. Despite the shortcomings in Honneth’s recognition theory, his voluminous writings provide us with a wealth of detail and insights on which I wish to build in directions that Honneth did not travel, attempting to illuminate how individuals experience recognition and misrecognition and how they struggle for recognition and justice.

There are a number of aspects of Honneth’s large volume of work that I am not addressing in this book. I am not undertaking a genealogical study of Honneth’s philosophy, an extensive reconstruction of it, or an analysis of his historical and macrosocial theories. I am also not engaging in meta-questions about critical or social theory. My aim is to explore a particular set of questions and problems arising from

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Honneth’s work, attempting to solve them so as to provide a phenomenological foundation of misrecognition that can help shed light on the causes of injustice. I should also add that my focus is not on a “politics of recognition” or politics of misrecognition because I think that focusing on the experiences of individuals is the path to enhancing our understanding of social injustice. I will argue that thinking in terms of group identities is a contributor to misrecognition and injustice.

This book is composed of two stand-alone but connected parts. In Part One, I critique Honneth’s account of misrecognition and provide an alternative view of misrecognition that replaces his account. First, I analyze ways in which Honneth’s accounts of recognition and misrecognition are insufficient, especially in terms of misrecognition. I critique Honneth’s argument for the separation of recognition into three modes—love, respect, and esteem/solidarity—and reveal problems with this division. Despite the internal logic of his typology, it does not help us to see clearly what is going on when individuals give or withhold recognition. His separation between legal respect as what unifies people under universal rights and social esteem as what differentiates people through distinctive traits does not dully consider the complexities and interconnections involved in legal and esteem recognitions. His restriction of love recognition to the family sphere fails to include the many forms and degrees that intimate relations can take and unduly separates it from solidarity. My analysis reveals that recognition can be described better as behaviors in which individuals and social institutions engage in varying degrees with recognition norms and with other individuals. I then reconstruct Honneth’s account of misrecognition, showing that he presents misrecognition as the contrary of recognition, which I argue is lacking in sufficient complexity and detail to describe the phenomena of misrecognition and individuals’ experiences of it.

To build a more robust and fine-grained picture of misrecognition, I first critique Honneth’s typology of misrecognition as the contrary of recognition. Honneth is correct to understand that recognition is guided by social norms; however, it is not the case that misrecognition is always a violation of recognition norms. The social norms themselves may be at fault either in being intrinsically biased against some members of society or in inadequately reflecting individuals’ attributes and needs. Also, if Honneth’s typology of
recognition is inadequately complex and fine-grained to describe recognition relations, then presenting misrecognition as the contrary of recognition within that typology will also be inadequately complex and fine-grained to describe the ways in which recognition relations can go wrong.

To address these concerns, I develop a multidimensional view of misrecognition that replaces Honneth’s binary account of misrecognition as the contrary to recognition without replacing Honneth’s conceptions of the value of recognition. The dimensions I identify are the levels of engagement with recognition norms, with other individuals, and with action. The multidimensional characterization of misrecognition describes it as a varied phenomenon that is more than the contrary of recognition. Disengagement from social norms is misrecognition, but I identify forms of engagement with social norms that also lead to misrecognition and result in domination and oppression. One example is what I call “pathological recognition” in which the recognition norms are intrinsically biased and, though appearing to recognize individuals positively, in practice reduce those individuals’ social status and autonomy. “Normative discrimination” provides another example, denoting the engagement with a recognition order that designates social groups as having particular traits that should be negatively recognized. Lack of engagement with individuals includes a quotidian forgetfulness of others or deliberate and selective disengagement from others all of which result in misrecognition. I also identify ways that engagement with individuals can result in misrecognition. The action dimension of engagement in misrecognition is the level of action of the engagement with or disengagement from norms and/or other individuals. This multidimensional view allows for a more robust and fine-grained account of what goes wrong in recognition relations leading to misrecognition and injustice. By replacing Honneth’s overly simplified account of misrecognition with a more robust, multidimensional account, we can address one weakness in recognition theory and better equip it to address its practical aims of diagnosing injustice.

One complaint about the concept of recognition is that it is limiting and inflexible and maintains, if not creates, injustice and oppression. If recognition means conformity to homogeneity and ideological power structures, then recognition is at best problematic. It is true that some forms of forced conformity are labeled “recognition” by both defenders and
critics of recognition, but I will argue that these forms of “recognition” are distortions of recognition that are, in practice, pathological. This identification shows that much of the criticism of recognition is directed at pathological forms of recognition and, therefore, is actually criticizing injustices that are misrecognitions, for which healthy mutual recognition is the remedy. Pathological forms of recognition assume that identity is solely group oriented. As I will show, this assumption of group identity is inherently a misrecognition of individuals that leads to injustice.

The injustices of the oppression of women, racial minorities, and workers are better understood, I argue, through the multidimensional view of misrecognition, which sees misrecognition behaviors along dimensions of engagement with norms, engagement with other individuals, and engagement with action. For example, within institutional racism are varieties of misrecognition behaviors and associated varieties of injustices suffered by marginalized groups that are revealed by applying the multidimensional view to individual behaviors. The multidimensional view of misrecognition opens up the complexities of social behaviors by appreciating the conflicts between recognition demands that individuals face and the ways social norms and individual involvements turn into behaviors of injustice.

Part Two of this book is a critical examination of Honneth’s account of struggles for recognition—the emancipation from injustice. Honneth sees struggles for recognition as the driving force for historical change. I accept Honneth’s statement of the importance to critical theory of struggles for recognition, but if struggles for recognition are to be the “guiding thread of critical theory,” then he needs a fuller account of what is involved in struggles for recognition. To understand better how oppression and other injustices are resisted, and why often they are not, we need a revised account of struggles for recognition and their preconditions that correct some omissions in Honneth’s account.

My critique of Honneth’s account of struggles for recognition identifies two problems: His premise that emotional experiences of misrecognition motivate struggles for recognition is contradictory without an account of individual agency, and his theoretical reliance on political resistance movements leaves out other paths that responses to injustice

13 Honneth, The Struggle for Recognition, 144.
can take. I propose the following solutions to these two problems: First, Honneth claims that experiences of injustice will motivate individuals to a struggle for recognition, but how can an individual, being damaged by misrecognition and lacking the recognition that Honneth says is necessary for one to be autonomous, have the capacity to struggle for recognition? To solve this dilemma, we need to include some conception of individual agency and responsibility in the undertaking of struggles for recognition. I incorporate the response model of recognition, Christine Korsgaard’s concept of self-constitution,¹⁴ McNay’s interpretation of habitus,¹⁵ and insights from several other philosophers to give us a conceptual basis for how an individual could develop the oppositional consciousness to respond to experiences of suffering subjectively with a struggle for recognition within a cultural power structure. The ideas that individuals’ actions contribute to the constitution of their practical identities—composed of their roles, relationships, and membership in social groups—and that they can act out of that sense of self despite the misrecognition they receive from others, helps resolve the agency dilemma of how an individual undertakes a struggle for recognition.

Second, I take issue with the tendency in recognition theory, not just in Honneth, to consider struggles for recognition predominantly as collective political movements for legal justice. I argue that Honneth incorrectly collapses interpretive structures that inform individuals that they are being treated unjustly with collective political movements against injustice. Although political struggles for recognition are the most accessible to social theory, considering only or predominantly such collective movements creates a lacuna that hides other forms and aspects of struggles for recognition. Most specifically, this theoretical view leaves out the very personal aspects that we can find in struggles for recognition. By decentralizing struggles for recognition from collective political movements and adding the concept of individual agency, we can craft a more robust picture of struggles for recognition.

Instead of connecting struggles for recognition with political resistance movements as Honneth does, I argue there are two types of struggles for recognition:

¹⁵ McNay, *Against Recognition*.
• Affirmational: The ongoing efforts of individuals to seek recognition that constructs and affirms their personal identities and their place in society. Affirmational struggles attempt to fulfill human needs that are present prior to any particular social interaction and are the constant general condition of being a social individual.

• Transformational: Responses to circumstances or instances of misrecognition that seek to rectify perceived injustices and restore healthy recognition relations. Transformational struggles attempt to fulfill needs caused by feelings of being misrecognized.

The familiarity of continually needing to affirm one’s identity and social relations is a resource on which individuals can draw in engaging in transformational struggles against injustice. Placing these struggles in the context of social power relations and the multidimensional view of misrecognition clarifies how individuals respond to misrecognition with varying struggles for recognition.

At the heart of the struggle for recognition is a struggle for authority, Cillian McBride observes\(^\text{16}\) — a struggle over the authority and power to interpret and apply recognition norms. Struggles for power and authority over recognition norms and relations play out not only between social institutions and cultural groups but also intersubjectively among individuals and factor heavily in all interpersonal relations, including with whom we choose to have relationships. This insight is central to understanding how any individual responds to experiences of misrecognition—whether to acquiesce, withdraw, or undertake a transformational struggle. Individuals need an interpretive structure to understand the moral content of their experiences and what options of response are available to them. However, struggles for recognition are not limited to collective political struggles for legal rights or social esteem; they include struggles over identity, which, though they have personal, social, and political dimensions, are always struggles undertaken by individuals in the service of their own individual concerns. This understanding amends Honneth’s account by opening up other phenomena of individual responses to injustice. We can then see that some individuals form and join subcultures to

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increase potential recognition relations, perhaps separating from others including through subcultural antagonism toward others and the self-recognition that I call “manufactured recognition.”

Finally, I deal with another gap in Honneth’s theory (and social theory in general): the question of why, if experiencing misrecognition is a prerequisite for struggles for recognition, then how is it that anyone not so injured can join in solidarity with those who have been injured by misrecognition? Why did white people join the American civil rights movement; why do heterosexuals join same-sex marriage legalization movements; and so on? The answer to this gap is to understand that love recognition can extend beyond the family sphere where Honneth places it and that compassion for others can join with a rational understanding that others are being misrecognized. Our individual agency enables us to join others’ struggles for recognition, acts that are movements of recognizing other individuals and their transformational struggles as people and causes worth our time and energy.

My expanded view of struggles for recognition takes it beyond identity politics and group political conflicts into everyday social experiences, expanding Honneth’s account. Collective social movements and the social changes they engender are best seen as arising from the dynamic social interactions among individuals who, in the context of their own lives, take action. Actions against injustice do not have to be political, organized collective action, and this is significant for social and political philosophy. The insights into struggles for recognition, combined with the multidimensional view of misrecognition, contribute to social theory with a set of conceptual tools that strengthen our understandings of how and why individuals contribute to injustices and respond to injustices. It also casts new light on political movements, social conflicts, and the dynamics of interpersonal relations.