

## **Honneth and Recognition as Sensitizing Concept for Narrative Analysis<sup>1</sup>**

**Ted Fleming & Fergal Finnegan**  
NUI Maynooth

### **Introduction**

Over a number of years a number of questions in adult education have resisted a search for a more comprehensive answer. These concern, for example, the following. Firstly, adults who have returned to education frequently express their deep satisfaction with the learning experience and inform evaluators that their self-confidence and esteem has been greatly enhanced. What does this enhancement involve? Does this gain in sense of self reflect the increasing importance of credentials in the labour market, a successful adaptation to, often classed and gendered, social norms, a new form of reflexive individualism or provide more evidence of the pervasive use of therapeutic language in society? The predominance of the theme of 'self esteem' in the interviews undertaken as part of an ongoing EU funded study of access and retention of non-traditional students in higher education (RANLHE, 2009) and the search for useful sensitising concepts for this research (SCUTREA, 2009) has forced us to reconsider what this refrain in student interviews might mean. With an interest in critical pedagogy we have been looking for ways of empirically deepening our understanding of what they mean when they make such observations.

Secondly, having engaged in a study of the ideas of Jürgen Habermas (Fleming, 2009; Murphy & Fleming, 2006) and those of John Bowlby (2008a) we have intuitively grasped that there is a connection between Bowlby's Attachment Theory (with the importance it gives to reciprocal and close relationships of care and security inducing attention) and Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action on the other hand (with its imperative of engaging in discourses that are egalitarian, free and democratic). How these might be connected is an ongoing project. Thirdly, there is an ongoing need to rescue the concept of lifelong learning (Field, 2007; Finnegan, 2008; Illeris, 2004) from domination by the one-dimensional economic (neo-liberal) version in command in many policy discourses and re-establish a critical theory of lifelong learning.

We propose to explore the ideas of Axel Honneth as a way of developing a dialogue about these issues. Honneth was a student of Jürgen Habermas at Munich and has worked at the Frankfurt School (Institute for Social Research) at the University of Frankfurt and at the Free University in Berlin.

His current work on developing a theory of recognition attempts to both further develop critical theory and rethink how structure and agency are related. The central insight of Habermas and others that human development can only be achieved intersubjectively is expanded by Honneth to emphasise the key role of recognition and respect in this process. Respect is at the core of Habermas' theory of Communicative Action and distortions in communication are forms of disrespect. For Honneth the need and desire for recognition precedes communication and the theory relies less on cognitive rationality calling for 'critical theory to focus on a term that has a decidedly subjective, non-economic, psychological and cultural character' (Alexander & Pia Lara, 1996, p.129). Recognition rather than communication is at the centre of his model.

In contrast to the ideas of Foucault, Bourdieu and to a lesser extent Habermas, these ideas have had almost zero impact on educational philosophy, research and practice, with a small number of notable exceptions (Huttunen, 2008 & Murphy, 2008; 2009) on. This paper will attempt to rectify this by proposing that the ideas of Honneth have significant implications for

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understanding how adults experience returning to education; as a sensitising concept for researching the experience of non-traditional students in HE; and for developing a critical theory of lifelong learning.

### **Honneth's Remapping of Critical Theory:**

Honneth's recent work amounts to an ambitious project to reconfigure and reanimate critical theory. He clearly aligns himself with this tradition and argues that the purpose of critical philosophy is to investigate social problems in their historical context with emancipatory intent. One is reminded of Marx's Theses on Feuerbach where the point is not just to understand (as objects of contemplation) but to change the world:

Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it. (Marx, Theses on Feuerbach (reference)).

Nonetheless, he is explicit that although his work is deeply embedded in this political and philosophical tradition his work on recognition marks a significant departure from Marxism in general and early Frankfurt School philosophy in particular. Marxist theory is criticised by Honneth for having little grasp of the role of values and ethics in political and everyday life and of succumbing to a version of economic utilitarianism. Writers within this broad tradition who have sought to understand how the moral imagination and indignation at injustice shapes the political world, such as E. P Thompson and Gramsci, are cited by Honneth as exceptions that prove the general rule. The break from the established social and methodological premises of early critical theory- 'ideas for which there no longer seems to be any kind of resonance within the experience of the accelerating present' (Honneth, 2009, p. 19)- is also sharply delineated. Although he frequently alludes to the work of Adorno, Horkheimer and Benjamin he is emphatic that we must recognise that the historical context in which this work was developed has disappeared. He argues that the hopes that sustained the early twentieth century workers movement, the appalling brutality of Soviet power and the fear of a completely managed society in Western Europe, all key elements in the genesis of critical theory, no longer shape the social imagination or provide useful coordinates for intellectual work. Similarly, he distances himself from Habermas while acknowledging his intellectual debt to him and to Habermas's 'linguistic turn' of critical theory (2005) arguing that cognitive rationalism with its emphasis on undistorted communication, is too cognitivist, too rationalistic and too abstract (too Kantian) and that he ignores the normative basis of capitalism.

By engaging in the debate about the emphasis on justice as fairness or on justice as the normative ideal of free communication, as in Habermas, he argues more against this Kantian position coming from a Hegelian position arguing for a reinstatement of the ethical as against the Kantian moral criteria. He moves in the direction of Charles Taylor in this emphasis on the 'good life' rather than merely on the just life and;

Rooting it in the communal rather than abstract organization, concrete rather than universal normative criteria, and substantive rather than procedural values which highlight difference and uniqueness over the generality and similarity.

(Alexander & Pia Lara, 1996, p. 127)

In his critique of this tradition Honneth asserts that the project of emancipatory philosophy has to be entirely reimagined. His solution to this challenge is to foreground a theory of intersubjectivity and the 'struggle for recognition' as the crucial mooring points for future efforts in critical theory. Honneth argues 'the reproduction of social life is governed by the imperative of mutual recognition, because one can develop a practical relation-to-self only when one has learned to view oneself, from the normative perspective of one's partners in interaction, as their social addressee (1995, p. 92). So in order for humans to achieve a productive relationship with themselves (an identity) humans require an intersubjective recognition of their abilities and achievements. This is the foundation of one's moral consciousness and of society as a whole and one develops a morality in the context of the

reactions (positive and negative) one receives from another human being in the struggle for recognition. Honneth argues that the struggle for recognition, based on the need for self-esteem and the experience of disrespect, also explains *social* development. 'It is by the way of the morally motivated struggles of social groups-their collective attempt to establish, institutionally and culturally, expanded forms of recognition-that the normatively directional change of societies proceeds' (1995, p. 92).

This, of course, is part of a more general turn to issues of recognition and identity in the social sciences and philosophy (for instance in the work of Charles Taylor and Nancy Fraser etc) and a renewed concern with the ethical dimension of philosophy (ie MacIntyre). What distinguishes Honneth's theory of recognition is the wide range of intellectual resources he deploys in developing his model, the ambition of the model in terms of his claims for its explanatory value, and his insistence on the continuing importance of emancipatory hope as a constituent part of social theory. He attempts to make a systematic connection between radical social critique and the best empirical research and thinking about our society.

### **Honneth's Theory of Recognition**

Honneth uses Hegel's early Jena writings as the departure point for his theory of recognition, a combination of esteem and love. This theme was elaborated throughout the phases of Hegel's work in distinct ways and is central to his concept Master and Slave

...the Lord achieves his recognition through another consciousness; for in them, the other consciousness is expressly something unessential, both by its working on the thing, and by its dependence on a specific existence. In neither case can it be lord over the being of the thing and achieve absolute negation of it. Here, therefore, is present this moment of recognition, viz. that the other consciousness sets aside its own being-for-self, and in so doing itself does what the first does to it...But for recognition proper the moment is lacking, that what the lord does to the other he also does to himself, and what the bondsman does to himself he should also do to the other. The outcome is a recognition that is one-sided and unequal. (Hegel, 1998, p. 116)

Hegel sees the intersubjective nature of identity formation as emerging in the context of one's relationships or from the ways other persons encounter the self. This primarily takes place in the family, civil society and State. Each of these corresponds to a level of relation to one's self. Morality, according to Hegel, is not received through divine revelation but in the context of the positive and negative feedback received in the struggle for recognition.

Honneth develops this tripartite model but shifts the emphasis from institutions to broader social spheres. He argues that there are three differentiated recognition orders in modern society the development of which are crucial to understanding the dynamics and historical evolution of capitalism and modernity. Each social sphere is defined by the different forms of recognition needs and expectations. Recognition, a simultaneously individual and social need, requires love in the immediate interpersonal sphere for the 'singular needy subject' for the development of self-confidence; the recognition of the autonomous rights bearing person in law offers the basis for self-respect; and the successful formation of a co-operative member of society whose efforts are socially valued is necessary to build self-esteem (Honneth in Honneth & Fraser, p 161). It should be noted that this is not simply an adaptation of Hegel for the twenty first century. The theory is layered, and also stripped of some of the metaphysical abstraction of German Idealist philosophy by an engagement with, sociology and psychology. In particular it relies on a reading of the work of George Herbert Mead, and the object relations psychology elaborated by Donald Winnicott and, less explicitly, a novel use of Foucault's genealogy of modernity.

The first of the three forms of relating is self-confidence, according to Honneth, and is established and developed in the relationships of friendship and love and is based on the right to exist. If one experiences love an ability to love one's self and others is developed. One is capable of forging an identity by receiving recognition from others. This is the process by which individuals individuate themselves as distinct from others. Without a special relationship with another person it is not possible to become aware of one's own uniqueness and special characteristics. In this way a positive image of one's abilities is developed. His concept of being 'reconciled with others' (Hegel) means that only by being recognised can we achieve an identity and this Hegelian concept of being reconciled with others was developed by both Dewey and Mead. This is also reminiscent of Bowlby's Attachment Theory (Fleming, 2008) which maps the relationships of trust that build a secure base for identity and are key to expressing one's needs without fear of rejection. In the language of Erik Erikson and Winnicott these are the relationships that create trust through being accepted, recognised and support the expression of ones' needs without fear of abandonment. These are also the preconditions for the formation of identity and morality. If this essential ingredient of development is not available or a negative message about self-worth is given then the outcome is a potential hiatus or missing piece in the personality that may seek and find 'expression through negative emotional reactions of shame or anger, offence or contempt' (Honneth, 1995, p. 257).

Hegel +	Contexts in which one develops ways of relating to self (or forms of social organisation)	Forms of Relating to Self (stages of identity development)	One Can...	Task for..
Family (love)	Relations of friendship & love. <i>personality</i>	Self-confidence	Care	Parents, carers
Civil society (rights)	Recognised as autonomous person with rights. <i>Social Organization</i>	Self-respect	Recognise legal rights	School
State (solidarity & recognition from work) or in AH any community of affiliation	Performance of ones freedom and autonomy through work = how the community values one's contribution. <i>Culture</i>	Self-esteem	Recognise the contribution of others	Society (incl adult and higher education)

Table 1. Forms of relating to self as linked to Hegel and as understood by Honneth<sup>2</sup>

The second type of relationship to self involves self-respect, when a person in a community of rights is given recognition as a morally and legally mature person. When a person is recognised at this level one is accepted as an autonomous person who has both a right and an ability to participate in the discussions and debates of the institution concerned, i.e. state or organisations. Respect is shown to other people by relating toward them as having rights. Without rights there is no respect. For some, e.g. Kant, the formation of the autonomous person is the main goal of education. The self-relation that is gained from the experience of being treated as such a mature person is self-respect. The price paid for the absence of this recognition is the absence of autonomy. Again this is clearly linked to the development and growth of discourses and practices that are specific to modernity and were articulated

<sup>2</sup> Note to autors: Think of doing one table (possibly deleting the Hegel bits)

differently in feudal societies. It is clear that the securing and development of the rights of the individual is viewed by Honneth as an important social gain indicating that he holds a more optimistic conception of modernity than the first generation of critical theorists.

But this is not the highest form of recognition, according to Honneth. The missing part as to the performance of that autonomy through work and the dilemma for the person is whether the community will honour their contribution through work. The experience of being so honoured leads to a form of self-relation that Honneth calls self-esteem. People with high self-esteem will reciprocate a mutual acknowledgement of each others contribution to the community and loyalty and solidarity grow from this (Honneth, 2007, p. 139).

Only through self-directed and autonomous work can one perform one's freedom of will. And only when one begins to work out one's own free will for a common good can one become respected in a community (or the state in Hegelian terms). Self-esteem means that one sees one's work being acknowledged and recognised. (Huttunen, 2007, p. 426)

In this way the individual becomes 'recognised as a person whose capabilities are of constitutive value to a concrete community' (Honneth, 1997, p. 20). This reciprocal and mutual recognition of each other through work becomes a strong feeling of solidarity in the community and such well recognised people are capable of being, as a result, strongly motivated. People earn self-esteem from society if their activities are in tune with society and society provides the basis on which they can become worthy members of society.

It is not surprising to have three corresponding forms of disrespect, corresponding to the forms of respect. At an obvious level, if a child is neglected and humiliated they may lose self-confidence. If people are denied citizenship or denied rights their self-respect may suffer and finally if one's way of life is not recognised or respected then damage is done to one's self-esteem. For these reasons abuse, insults, ignoring people will not only be an injustice (it will harm people and deny their civil rights) but injuries are done to their understanding of themselves, their identity. If one, for instance, only receives feedback when a mistake is made, one's self-esteem will not develop. Mudslinging or other forms of 'put down' are so often the result of low self-esteem from the source of the insult.

Forms of relating to self	Forms of recognition	Forms of disrespect	Component of personality	
Self Confidence	Parent secure attachment & love and care	Neglect, abuse, emotional neglect	Physical integrity & psychological damage	
Self-respect	Legal rights	Violation of legal rights, civil and human rights and employment rights	Social integrity And treated as an object	
Self-esteem	Community of practice, respect & solidarity	Bullying, ignoring, excluding, constant negative feedback	Honour, dignity,	

Table 2 Honneth on Forms of relating to self and forms of recognition

### **Justice, Redistribution and Recognition: Honneth's debate with Nancy Fraser**

Locating the source of conflict and social progress in the struggle for recognition Honneth consciously breaks with Kantian influenced procedural ethics, promoted most famously by John Rawls, which has been so influential in contemporary debates about justice. As noted earlier it also marks a theoretical rupture with some of the key premises of Marxist and

Marxist influenced social theory that have stressed the importance of economic processes in social reproduction and have largely regarded talk of the mobilising force of moral values as a distraction from the issue of uncovering exploitation. Nancy Fraser, another critical theorist strongly influenced by feminism, who has also elaborated a model of how identity formation and recognition might be understood in relation to economic justice, has taken up some of these important issues in an extended debate with Honneth (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). This philosophically rich and provocative debate offers a useful departure point to begin to assess the strengths and weaknesses of Honneth's theory.

Honneth claims that the struggle for recognition lies behind all major social conflicts and that the conflicts over distribution of goods and wealth is (contrary to Fraser) 'locked into the struggle for recognition' (Honneth, 2001, p. 54). Fraser's response is that this is too monistic and too subjectivist and that social struggles are better understood from a dual perspective which includes both recognition and distributive elements. This 'dual perspective' position synthesises the models of justice developed by the workers movement and by the new social movements (feminism, the ecological and peace movement etc). Honneth replies that the model is too concerned with what has been made known already by social groups and ignores both hidden injustices and he is;

convinced that the terms of recognition must represent the unified framework for such a project....Critical Theory, under present conditions, does better to orient itself by the categorical framework of a sufficiently differentiated theory of recognition, since this establishes a link between the social causes of wide-spread feelings of injustice and the normative objectives of emancipatory movements.

(Honneth 2003, p. 113)

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

There are a number of areas in which these ideas have implications. Few of these have been addressed in the literature of adult education and the discussion here is to outline (rather than discuss fully) the possible implications.

#### *Understanding adult's experience of self-confidence*

The ways in which adults experience returning to education is often framed in the language or narrative of increased self-confidence. We are of the view that these theoretical ideas of Honneth about the importance of self-confidence and self-esteem enable us to understand (or interpret) what adult students experience. More importantly it allows us to see that closely connected to the experience of increased self-confidence there is a development of one's identity based on the increased self-recognition. While it may be interesting to assert this connection it provides an important research agenda or research task to ascertain a more in-depth understanding of the experience of self-confidence.

#### *Sensitising concept set for interpreting narratives of students – RANLHE*

Narrative research is a recognised research methodology for making visible the acts of recognition and misrecognition (disrespect) that are part of social interactions (Huttunen, 2008, p. 89)

The narratives [in the RANLHE research at NUI Maynooth] tell of a significant number of students in higher education who have stories of increased self-esteem. Not only do they hold education, teachers, well-educated and articulate people in high esteem but they want to be held in high esteem themselves. A typical comment that students make to underline their motivation for participation in higher education makes this kind of statement:

*I hold the position of teacher in esteem. It is a job of esteem and I still feel that. When you are working class, you look for esteem...we held teacher, priest and garda*

*[police] sergeant in esteem. I had the perception that these are positions of recognition. I was probably looking for that.*

It is implied in the work of Honneth that such a pursuit is a process of identity development and increases the forms of respect and recognition that are available to the student. The way in which these are bestowed on the student imply that there is a social dimension as a society or community is, through the validation and qualification of higher education, acknowledging and respecting the individual in ways that issue in increased social solidarity and respect. This is a process of identity development.

**The tantalising possibility is being presented here that self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem or indeed the environments in which these forms of respect are created, supported and enhanced are really the habitus (or dispositions) that contribute to successful participation (retention) in Higher Education.**

Honneth's work can clearly be usefully seen with and against the work of Pierre Bourdieu on symbolic violence, misrecognition, cultural capital and habitus. Of key importance in any such discussion is how one understands the source, dynamics and 'rewards' of social struggle, an issue which has recently been explored with considerable acuity (Sayer, 2005) A fruitful discussion of these issues in relation to Alheit's (1996) and Merrill's (1999) research would usefully draw out a number of these issues.

#### *Link attachment theory and communicative action through recognition*

It is an important part of adult learning to come to know the mechanisms, dynamics and competencies of giving and receiving recognition. It is important because the alternative undermines motivation to work constructively, reduces productivity and in addition individual identity formation and development are undermined. In this way the political and the personal are intimately connected. We are inclined to see the lifelong pursuit of recognition as analogous to Bowlby's often forgotten claim that the pursuit of secure attachments is a lifelong process. We are of this view because the dynamics of constructing a secure attachment in children involve the recognition by the carer of the child's need for security.

There is general acceptance among researchers on attachment theory that the sense of a secure attachment is connected with a positive mental representation of others, self-esteem and an ability to rely on one's own constructive ways of coping in times of stress (Fraley & Shaver, 2008). The pursuit of a secure attachment style and internal working models that Bowlby described as a lifelong project is now potentially a staged process of giving and receiving recognition and respect that has the same dividend as Bowlby's lifelong project. In this view justice, care, recognition and respect are integrated in one project that has significant potential for the individual and for society. This is supported in a review by Mikulincer & Shaver (2005) confirming that secure attachments are important in achieving self-recognition. Clearly the work of West (1996) is relevant to these issues.

This raises the possibility that lifelong learning is being redefined as a more basic human need and a fundamental developmental project than the version found in the dominant narratives and discourses of public policy.

#### *A new dimension for lifelong learning as learning for democracy*

An education that is strategic and interested in strategic knowledge or strategic teaching treats students as objects, knowledge as facts to be imparted and is instrumental in its philosophical orientation. Communicative education in contrast is critical of presuppositions; aims to create an ideal speech situation in which the force of the better argument is the only force and in which all have full and equal rights to participate in a discursive form of democratic will-formation. Respect is the essence of this approach to education, learning and teaching. The

form of democracy being proposed is not that of liberal democracy as found in the modern world or of representative democracy either.

Today, these key terms ordinarily designate two normative models of democracy whose common goal it is to give democratic will formation a greater role than is usual in political liberalism. Instead of limiting the participatory activity of citizens to the function of periodically legitimating the state's exercise of power, this activity is to be a permanent matter embodied in the democratic sphere and should be able to be understood as the source of all political decision-making processes.

(Honneth, 1998, p. 1)

Liberal democracy according to Honneth (2007, p. 218) involves 'limiting the participatory activities of citizens to the function of periodically legitimating the state's exercise of power.' The proposed democracy is nearer that proposed by Dewey in *Democracy and Education* (1916) and *The Public and its Problems* (1989).

Axel Honneth's theory of recognition outlines how the formation of a democratic personality (see also Biesta, 2007) requires the three forms of self-relation. We need caring and loving individuals and these are produced through and by those with self-confidence. It requires a good recognition of the reciprocal nature of legal rights and, as one might anticipate, only a person who possesses self-respect (the capacity to know one's own rights) can recognise the rights of others. And thirdly, a democratic society requires the reciprocal recognition of work and again, only a person with good levels of self-esteem can recognise the contribution of others. If care and self-confidence are learned originally in the family and self-respect the product of schooling and education one is led to ask how in a modern world one can acquire self-esteem. It may be achieved as part of the normal interaction between adults in a functioning society but the thought is also worth exploring as to whether the achievement of adult education is capable of being identified as contributing to self-esteem too. Now the possibility of naming the original question of this paper about the achievements of adults that are articulated as increased self-confidence, self-respect and possibly that of self-esteem – all crucial for the formation of a functioning democracy.

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Fergal Finnegan is a Government of Ireland Scholar at NUIM

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