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Axel Honneth and the Struggle for Recognition: Implications for Transformative Learning

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Abstract

Transformative learning theory has built on humanistic foundations and on the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas. This paper explores some of the implications of the iteration to critical theory provided by Axel Honneth, who belongs to the third generation of critical theorists associated with the Frankfurt School. The paper examines Honneth's reframing of critical theory based on his theory of recognition. This new connection between an individual pursuit of recognition and motivation of social movements for emancipation offers an opportunity to re-affirm the already existing conviction of transformation theory that learning is based on mutuality. In addition, the often remarked disconnect between individual learning and social learning is re-worked to assert that not only is the personal political but the political is personal. Empirical findings of an EU study of non-traditional learners in higher education support the rethinking of transformative learning as a pursuit of recognition.

Introduction

The theory of transformative learning has always viewed learning as having individual and social dimensions (Cranton & Taylor, 2012, p. 5). Critiques argue that transformation theory has an inadequate understanding of the social (Collard & Law, 1989; Clarke & Wilson, 1991) and others identify this as a disconnection and continuing issue (Cranton & Taylor, 2012, p. 7). Transformation theory is built on two sets of assumptions. Firstly, there are humanistic and constructivist assumptions that focus on the individual as a unit of analysis (Cranton & Taylor, 2012, p. 9). Secondly, there are assumptions from critical theory that focus on the social as a unit of analysis associated with (but not entirely) Jürgen Habermas (Brookfield, 2012; Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow affirms the seeming disconnect when he distinguishes subjective from objective reframing of meaning structures (2000, p. 23). Attempts have been made to address some of these issues in transformation theory (Fleming, 2002).

A more unified theoretical understanding of transformative learning sees learners engaging in both individual and social transformations that complement each other (Cranton & Taylor, 2012, p. 12). But little work has been done to bridge the gap. This paper will explore Axel Honneth's theory of recognition and re-configure this individual-social dualism.

Who is Axel Honneth?

Axel Honneth, a student of Habermas, is now Director of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research and also Professor of Humanities at Columbia University. He sets out to refocus critical theory by seeing distortions in communication (Habermas) as forms of disrespect and the need and desire for recognition precede communication. He expands the key insight that human development can only be achieved intersubjectively through recognition. His theory relies less on cognitive rationality, and the communicative turn of Habermas (1987) has become the recognition turn of Honneth (1995, p. 262).

The task of critical theory is to identify what experiences can be found within social reality that contain "system-exploding energies and motivations" in pursuit of freedom and justice (Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p. 242). Honneth offers "a link between the social causes of widespread feelings of injustice and the normative objectives of emancipatory movements"

(Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p.113). This is a response to Habermas's claim to have provided a normative grounding for critical theory through the theory of communicative action. Honneth re-writes critical theory where damaged recognition is the pathology to be overcome, rather than distorted communication.

He reworks Hegel, Marx, Mead and Winnicott in ways that are reminiscent of Habermas but less dismissive of their contributions and focuses on the pathologies of subject formation in late capitalism. The distortions in identity are the motivation for social conflict and struggle and move the debate about emancipation away from the highly cognitive and rational interest in emancipation toward an alternative theory of intersubjectivity. This has the potential to resolve the transformation theory disconnection concerning whether learning is an individual or social phenomenon – implying that not only is the personal political but the political is personal. Transformative learning becomes *both* personal and social.

Honneth, following Mead and Winnicott, understands the intersubjectivity between parent and child as a form of socialization that assists the development of individual identity through the reciprocal recognition of “each other ... as living emotionally needy beings” (Honneth, 1995, p. 18). Self-determination and self-realization can only be achieved through interpersonal relationships (Honneth, 1995, p.74). One's private relationships of love and attachment are a precondition for participation in public life and political will formation.

While taking some liberties with Mead's notion of subject-formation, Honneth sees taking the perspectives of others as moments of recognition;

...for it is his taking of the attitude of the others that guarantees to him the recognition of his own rights. To be a “me” under these circumstances is an important thing. It gives him his position, gives him the dignity of being a member in the community...It is the basis of his entering into the experience of others.

(Honneth 1995, p. 79)

For Honneth the re-working of Winnicott allows him rethink Hegel's work on love that Honneth understands as a form of recognition (1995, p. 100). In *The Struggle for Recognition* Honneth interprets the separation between mother and child as a struggle for recognition leading to the development of the child's independence, constructed through Winnicott's object-relations theory (Honneth, 1995, p. 107). Pathologies of recognition can also be traced back to these foundational experiences (Honneth, 2009). Honneth sets out to re-imagine the project of critical theory arguing that;

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.

(Honneth, 1995, p. 92)

It is this recognition turn in critical theory that has implications for transformative learning. Mutuality (as in mutual understanding) when used by Habermas (1987, p. 121) means that we strive toward mutual understanding as long as we follow rules of discourse that have also shaped transformation theory. Transformative learning and communicative action are always already more than the following of linguistic rules and involve mutuality and intersubjectivity (Honneth, 1995, pp. 92-95). The antidote to being too individualistic lies in the critical theory foundations of transformation theory.

The struggle for recognition, based on the need for self-esteem and experiences of disrespect, 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.

(Honneth, 1995, p. 92)

Social change is driven by inadequate forms of recognition and the struggle for recognition becomes a form of social praxis. Internal (psychic) conflict leads to social change and in this way we begin to see how in critical theory the social and personal are connected.

Honneth on Recognition

Honneth argues that in modern society there are three levels of recognition “and an intersubjective struggle mediates between each of these levels, a struggle that subjects conduct in order to have their identity claims confirmed” (Honneth, 1997, p. 21).

The first form of relating is self-confidence, established and developed in relationships of friendship and love, usually in childhood. One is capable of forging an identity by receiving recognition from others. Without a special relationship with another it is not possible to become aware of one’s own uniqueness, develop a positive image of one’s abilities and achieve an identity (Honneth, 1997, p. 26). If one experiences love an ability to love one’s self and others develops. These relationships support the expression of one’s needs without fear of rejection or abandonment. If this essential ingredient of development is not available, or a negative message about self-worth is given to a child, then the outcome may damage the personality and that person may find “expression through negative emotional reactions of shame, anger, offence or contempt” (Honneth, 1995, p. 257).

The second type of relationship to self involves is *self-respect*, when a person in a community of rights is recognized as a legally mature person. Respect is shown to others by relating toward them in ways that recognize their rights. Without rights there is no respect. This means not just having good opinions of another but a sense they possess the universal dignity of persons as morally responsible agents or as capable of participating in public deliberations known as discursive will-formation.

The experience of being honored by the community for one’s contribution through work leads to the third form of self-relation - *self-esteem*. People with high self-esteem will reciprocate a mutual acknowledgement of each other’s contribution to the community. From this grow loyalty and solidarity (Honneth, 1995, pp.196-210; 2007, p. 139).

The possibility of realizing one’s needs and the possibility of identity development depend on the development of these three modes of relating that in turn can only be achieved intersubjectively. These three constitute Honneth’s version of the good life as they provide the conditions for successful identity development. Table 1 (below) shows these ideas schematically.

It is not surprising that there are three corresponding forms of disrespect (Honneth, 1995, p. 131). If people are denied rights their self-respect may suffer, or as Huttunen expresses it, there is “a mal-distribution of recognition” that damages self-esteem (2007, p. 428). Abuse, insults and ignoring people are not only injustices but undermine identity (Honneth, 1995, p. 132). Disrespect harms subjects and is destructive because it “injures them with regard to the

positive understanding of themselves that they have acquired intersubjectively” (Honneth, 1995, p, 131).

Forms of Relating to Self	Contexts in which ways of Relating to Self Develop	Forms of Recognition	As a result one can...	Forms of disrespect
Self-confidence	Relations of friendship & love.	Parent secure attachment of love and care	Care	Neglect, abuse, emotional neglect
Self-respect	Recognized as autonomous person with rights.	Legal rights	Recognize legal rights	Violation of legal, civil, human and employment rights
Self-esteem	Performance of one’s freedom and autonomy through work = how the community values one’s contribution.	Community of practice, respect & solidarity	Recognize contribution of others	Bullying, ignoring, excluding, constant negative feedback

Table 1. Forms of relating to self as outlined by Honneth (adapted from Honneth, 1995, p. 195)

Honneth thus brings private matters to the centre of sociological attention. Internal conflict leads to social change and in this way we begin to see how in critical theory the social and personal are connected. Social change is driven by inadequate forms of recognition and the struggle for recognition becomes a form of social praxis. The theory of recognition establishes a link between the social causes of experiences of injustice and the motivation for emancipatory movements (Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p. 113). The political is personal. This is an attempt to reconfigure the age old sociological discussion of structure and agency.

Empirical Confirmations

In EU funded research on Access and Retention of Non-traditional Learners in Higher Education (RANLHE, 2010) across seven EU countries the themes of respect, confidence and self-esteem emerge from the interviews (Fleming & Finnegan, 2014b, p. 56). [Mezirow’s original research basis of perspective transformation was also a study of adult returners to college (1978)]. The students interviewed in Ireland were seeking recognition, which touches on both their “private” and “public” selves. Intersubjective recognition emerged as a key theme in the data and has been central in students’ accounts of their motivation for applying to college and their determination “to stay the course.” The interviewee’s decision to go to college was informed by a desire for recognition that was rooted in a perceived lack or undeveloped capability which was often rooted in the experience of disrespect at school or work. Not only do they hold education and teachers in high esteem, they want to be held in high esteem themselves. They look to education to do. One student said;

When you are working class, you look for esteem...we held teacher, priest ... in esteem. I had the perception that these are positions of recognition. I was probably looking for that.

A significant number of student narratives tell stories of increased self-confidence and esteem.

Another, in her 30s, talked about her working class background and *“turbulent family life... I always refer to myself as the person who fell through the cracks ... in school”*. So despite the fact that she subsequently enjoyed a successful career where she was *“respected”* she decided *“I wanted to go back [to education] for my own self-esteem to try to see can I do this”*. In university she flourished and as a consequence has a stronger sense of self-esteem, agency and autonomy. *“It is about acceptance and your worth being recognized. It was a chance to learn and to be on an equal footing with other people”* (Fleming & Finnegan, 2014a, p. 151). Although each story has its own specific nuances, this narrative is typical. It is underpinned by the logic of intersubjective recognition and in her reflections she uses confidence, self-esteem, and respect as key terms. This learning is transformative.

Another middle-aged student told of significant disadvantage including periods of long-term institutionalization as an adult and her childhood was seriously poor. Her journey to university commenced in a workshop for adults. A supervisor encouraged her to return to education by recognizing that she had *“something.”* The support, though modest (a series of books given as gifts), was experienced as recognition of her intelligence:

They were seeing something...I think my reaction to the books they gave me...I thought they were the mad ones. They could see me starting college, they told me this since.

That’s what they said anyway. You come across people who, no matter how stupid or unaware you are of your ability, they can see something and they point it out.

She repeated, *“they can see something”* a number of times and it gave her the experience that *“someone might take me seriously.”* Such stories tell of recognition that is profoundly developmental. They hint strongly that if education is to provide transformative experiences these moments need to be turned into pedagogical experiences of recognition – they are a pre-condition for transformative learning.

Implications and Discussion

These ideas have had little impact on education apart from a few (Brown & Murphy, 2012; Huttunen, 2008; Murphy & Brown, 2012) and none at all on transformation theory. These ideas enable us to understand that closely connected to the experience of recognition and increased self-confidence there is a development of one’s identity. There is an in-built social dimension to learning through the validation and qualification offered by higher education.

Transformative learning theory has followed the communicative turn of Habermas and emphasised the pathology of distorted communication (Mezirow, 1991, pp. 64-99). Transformative learning theory might now follow the recognition turn of Honneth and identify the implications for transformation theory. Transformative learning is critical of presuppositions; aims to create discursive spaces in which the force of the better argument is the only force and in which all have full and equal rights to participate freely in democratic will-formation. Transformative learning requires critical reflection and now recognition becomes central to that process.

In order to engage in the discourse associated with transformative learning we now assert that the formation of democratic discussions requires three forms of self-relating. We need caring and loving individuals and these are produced through and by those with self-

confidence. It requires recognition of the reciprocal nature of legal rights and, as one might anticipate, a person who possesses self-respect (the capacity to know one's own rights) is better able to recognize the rights of others. And thirdly, a democratic discursive society requires the reciprocal recognition provided by work and solidarity. Again, a person with self-esteem can better recognize the contributions of others. This so called "recognition turn" (in addition to the communicative turn of Habermas) suggests strongly that the high rationality of the often critiqued version of transformative learning is "softened" by this understanding of the recognition that underpins democratic discourse.

Without altering the importance of communicative action or of critical reflection there is now the possibility of reframing transformation theory so that rational discourse is seen as based on an interpersonal process of support and recognition that build self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. Mezirow (and Habermas) see democratic participation as an important means of self-development that produces individuals who are more tolerant of difference, sensitive to reciprocity and better able to engage in moral discourse (2003, p. 60). It is important not to sink into a sentimental subjectivity here but build on this understanding; this is a precondition for rational discourse without losing rigor or the ambition to remain within the agenda of critical theory. The emphasis on whether learning is individual or social can be re-configured similar to the way Freire reconfigured the dualisms of subject/object, teacher/learner, leading to the introduction of the concept of praxis (1970, p. 75).

The individualism of the processes referred to by Mezirow as discursive learning is now also reframed as a fundamentally intersubjective process of mutual respect and recognition. These relations of mutuality are preconditions for self-realization, critical reflection and transformative learning. Recognition and emancipation are connected; recognition becomes the foundation on which communicative action, emancipatory learning and social change are based.

One of the key implications is to re-focus attention on the processes of teaching for transformation (indeed on all teaching) as a process of mutual recognition between teacher and learner. These engagements have the potential to strengthen identity development – or otherwise. With the emphasis on functional, competency and behavioral outcomes in education, and a neo-liberal inspired valorization of the market as the ultimate supplier of all needs, these ideas take seriously the contribution of intersubjectivity as important for teaching, learning and transformation. The motivation to engage in learning becomes less economic, functional and instrumental and more communicative and social and thus potentially transformative. This is achieved not just by an emphasis on critical reflection but on the always presupposed imperative of recognition.

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