Recognition in the work of Axel Honneth:
Implications for Transformative Learning Theory[1]

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Abstract: The struggle for recognition as outlined by Honneth is a useful construct for rethinking the kind of discourse normally associated with Habermas and transformative learning.

Introduction

The highly rational and abstract discourse of Habermas associated with democratic will-formation along with the rules for engaging in such discourses have influenced transformative learning theory. Communicative action and critical reflection are demanding activities. The conditions for engaging in discourse require adult learning capabilities such as the development of the capacity to be critically reflective as well as the ability to engage in 'critical dialectical discourse involving the assessment of assumptions and expectations supporting beliefs, values and feelings' (Mezirow, 2003, p. 60). These difficulties, at least in part, led to other understandings of transformative learning such as Boyd & Meyers (1988), according to Taylor (1998).

From the beginning Mezirow (1981) has closely allied transformative learning with the project of critical theory and democratic will-formation as outlined by Habermas. Jefferson, Marx, Gramsci, Dewey and Maxine Greene all note that democratic participation is an important means of self-development and produces individuals who are more tolerant of difference, sensitive to reciprocity, better able to engage in moral discourse and be more self-reflective (Mezirow, 2003, p. 60). Dewey understood that democracy 'necessarily emerges on the condition of an antecedent intersubjectivity of social life' (Honneth, 1998, p. 767).

Transformation theory has been critiqued on the basis that it does not have an adequate understanding of the social dimension of learning (Collard & Law, 1989; Clarke & Wilson, 1991) prompting clarifications and further development of the theory (Mezirow, 2003). The high level of rationality, the demands of critical reflection, the developmental dividend of democratic engagements and the much critiqued individualism of Mezirow's understanding of learning can be better understood by a study of Axel Honneth's work. This paper will explore the ideas of Honneth as a way of developing a dialogue about these issues.

Honneth and Critical Theory

Axel Honneth, originally a student of Jürgen Habermas at Munich, is now the Director of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. He works to enhance the project of emancipatory struggle for a more just society. He expands the key insight that human development can only be achieved intersubjectively by emphasizing the key role of recognition in this process. He sets out

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to refocus critical theory by 'grounding the theoretical and normative justification of intra-mundane social struggles for recognition upon an understanding of personal identity formation' (Zurn, 2000, p. 115). He locates the motivation for emancipatory critique within the domain of ordinary human experience. Habermas (2002, p. 208) does not think that this recognition paradigm involves a shift from his own work. Distortions in communication are for Honneth forms of disrespect and the need and desire for recognition precede communication. But his 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). The communicative turn of Habermas has become the recognition turn of Honneth (1994, p. 262) in this the third generation of critical theorists.

Recent conflicts and crises, particularly in Europe (Greece, Ireland,) and in North Africa) indicate that as long as people are denied the recognition they deserve, society will be normatively deficient. This is central to Honneth who, building on Hegel, emphasises not the struggle for self-preservation but the struggle for the creation of relations of mutual recognition as the pre-condition for self-realization and for the kinds of conversations that are democratic and understood as communicative action. Cognitive rationalism, he argues, with its emphasis on undistorted communication, is too cognitivist, too rationalistic and too abstract (too Kantian). It is this recognition turn in critical theory that I see as having implications for communicative action and transformative learning. According to Erman (2006) mutuality (as in mutual understanding) when used by Habermas (1996, p. 106) means that we strive toward mutual understanding as long as we follow the rules of discourse. The subject owes its constitution to its relationship with others and autonomy can only be realized in intersubjective dependency. Mutuality is important for Habermas and so 'inter' of intersubjectivity is thickened and mutuality illuminates the very preconditions of communicative action (Erman, p. 378). Communicative action (and transformative learning) is always already more than the following of linguistic rules and involves mutuality and intersubjectivity. Honneth (1995, pp. 92-95) has built on the work of Mead who saw the intersubjective basis for personal identity development, and the ways in which a consciousness of one's own subjectivity emerges. The antidote to being too individualistic is in the very foundations of the theory of transformative learning that also relies on mutuality, if we listen to Honneth.

These ideas have had little impact on education, apart from Huttunen (2008) and Murphy (2008) but do have significant implications for transformation theory. These ideas have also been used as sensitizing concepts for researching the experience of non-traditional students in higher education (RANLHE); and for developing a critical theory of lifelong learning.

Honneth sets out to re-imagine the project of critical theory. He argues 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)

In order to achieve a productive relationship with ourselves (an identity) we require an intersubjective recognition of our abilities and achievements. This is the foundation of one's

moral consciousness and of society as a whole. 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).

Though there are strong connections with the Marxist tradition of Gramsci and E.P. Thompson and frequent references to Adorno, Horkheimer and Benjamin he breaks with the established social and methodological premises of early critical theory. The historical context in which their work was developed has disappeared (Honneth, 2009, p. 219) and 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 no longer shape the social imagination or provide useful coordinates for intellectual work. Critical theory can rely on social agents who can struggle against domination and misrecognition and in so doing assert their identity (Honneth, 1995, p. 170). Individuals engage in struggle for recognition as part of the recovery of basic social conditions that are essential for them as human beings. This speaks directly to the conference theme.

Honneth and Recognition

Recognition in Hegel's early writings is the starting point for Honneth and in the story of 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 it 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)

Honneth argues that identity formation is an intersubjective process of struggling to gain mutual recognition from one's partners in interaction (Zurn, 2000, p. 116). This leads to the development of three different relations to self and the intersubjective processes of learning to view oneself, from the normative perspective of one's partners to interaction are the media through which individuals become who they are, and within which social forms of life are continually maintained and reproduced (Honneth, 1995, p. 92). Full human flourishing is dependent on well established ethical relations, of love, law and ethical life achieved through the struggle for recognition and take place in the family, civil society and the state. Each corresponds to three levels of relation to one's self.

Honneth argues that in modern society there are three differentiated recognition orders and;
three levels of increasingly more demanding patterns 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).

Recognition, a simultaneously individual and social need, requires love in the family or interpersonal sphere in order for the child to develop self-confidence. Recognition of the autonomous person, bearing rights in law, is the basis for self-respect. And the formation of a co-operative member of society whose efforts are socially valued leads to self-esteem (Honneth, 1995, pp. 92-130). The theory is layered, and also stripped of some of the metaphysical abstraction of German Idealist philosophy by an engagement with sociology and the psychology of Mead and the object relations theory of Winnicott.

The first form of relating is self-confidence, established and developed in the relationships of friendship and love. 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. Without a special relationship with another it is not possible to become aware of one's own uniqueness and so develop a positive image of one's abilities. Only by being recognized can we achieve an identity. In the language of Erikson (Honneth, 1997, p. 26) these are the relationships that create trust through being accepted and recognized. They support the expression of ones' 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, 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, anger, offence or contempt' (Honneth, 1995, p. 257).

The second type of relationship to self involves self-respect, when a person in a community of rights is recognized as a legally mature person. One is then accepted as having an ability to participate in the discussions of the institution concerned, i.e. state or organizations. Respect is shown to others by relating toward them as having rights. This form of self-relation is self-respect. Without rights there is no respect. It is not just having a good opinion of oneself but a sense of possessing the universal dignity of persons as morally responsible agents or as one capable of participating in the public deliberations we know as discursive will-formation. The price paid for the absence of this recognition is the absence of autonomy.

Forms of Relating to Self (stages of identity development)	Contexts in which one Develops ways of Relating to Self (or forms of social organization)	Forms of Recognition	One can…	Forms of disrespect
Self-confidence	Relations of friendship & love. *Personality*	Parent secure attachment of love and care	Care	Neglect, abuse, emotional neglect
Self-respect	Recognized as autonomous person with rights. *Social Organization*	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	Community of practice, respect & solidarity	Recognize contribution of others	Bullying, ignoring, excluding, constant negative feedback

		contribution. *Culture*			

Table 1. Forms of relating to self as understood by Honneth

The experience of being honored by the community for one's contribution through work leads to the third form of self-relation he calls 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, 2007, p. 139).

It is not surprising that corresponding to the three forms of respect there are three forms of disrespect that serve the function of explaining historical struggles for recognition.

> Experiences of disrespect serve as the moral motivation for individuals to struggle
> for expanded relationships of recognition by highlighting the defects in extant
> social arrangements. (Zurn, 2000, p. 117)

If people are denied rights their self-respect may suffer and if one's way of life is not recognized or respected then damage is done to one's self-esteem. For these reasons abuse, insults, ignoring people will not only be an injustice but injuries are done to their identity. Embedded in the structural logic of the three forms of respect and disrespect are three different forms of moral claim, to be recognized as the autonomous and unique person one is (Honneth, 1995, p, 131). It is these claims that are raised when individuals or groups struggle to overcome violations and injustices and other misrecognitions. When disrespect is experienced as a violation of universal norms the motivation is possible for collective political action for change. The possibility of realizing one's needs and the possibility of identity development depend on the development of the three modes of relating that in turn can only be achieved intersubjectively.

Implications and Discussion

Few of the implications of these ideas have been addressed in the literature of adult education and the discussion here is to outline (rather than discuss fully) the possible implications. Traditionally, adult education when it had a critical focus emphasised the philosophy of consciousness which looked at 'false consciousness' as a useful way of understanding what might be the focus of critical reflection. Transformation Theory followed the linguistic/communicative turn of Habermas and emphasised the pathology of distorted communication. It is the suggestion here that Transformation Theory might now follow the recognition turn or Honneth and identify the implication for transformation theory.

Understanding Adult's Experience of Self-confidence
Adults frequently frame their experiences of returning to education in narratives of increased self-confidence. These ideas of Honneth enable us to understand better (or interpret) that closely connected to the experience of increased self-confidence there is a development of one's identity based on increased self-recognition. While it may be interesting to assert this connection it provides an important research agenda to reach a better understanding of the experience of self-confidence.

In a recent EU funded research project the recognition theory of Honneth was used as a sensitizing concept for understanding the experiences of non-traditional students in higher

education (RANLHE). The narratives tell of a significant number of students in higher education who have stories of increased self-confidence and 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. They look to higher education to redeem this search for recognition. Typically one student told her narrative as;

> *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.*

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 and transformation.

This raises the possibility too that lifelong learning can be redefined as a more basic human need and that it has a personal development and social solidarity outcome remarkably different to the dominant economic take on lifelong learning.

A New Dimension for Transformation Theory: An Antidote to the Individualistic View
Communicative education or transformative learning are critical of presuppositions; aim 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 learning.

In order for one to be able to engage in the discourse associated with transformative learning we can now, by an extrapolation from Honneth's theory, assert that the formation of a democratic discussion requires 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 recognize the rights of others. And thirdly, a democratic society requires the reciprocal recognition of work. Again, only a person with good levels of self-esteem can recognize the contribution 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. If care and self-confidence are learned originally in the family and self-respect is 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 transformative education is capable of contributing to self-esteem. Now the possibility of answering the original question of this paper about how adults express the experiences of returning to learning as an increase in self-confidence, self-respect and possibly that of self-esteem – all crucial for the formation of a functioning democracy. The difficulties associated with both the high level of rational discourse and the challenges of critical reflection

are based on something much nearer the normal every-day experiences of adults – the struggle for recognition.

Without altering the importance of communicative action or of critical reflection there is now the possibility of reframing some of the critiques 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. It is important not to sink into a sentimental subjectivity but build this understanding as an antidote to disrespect; a precondition for rational discourse and a 'softening' of the sometimes cold rational debate without loosing its rigor or ambition to remain within the tradition and agenda of critical theory.

The individualism of the processes referred to by Habermas and Mezirow as discursive learning to which some critics refer is now also reframe as fundamentally intersubjective process of mutual respect and recognition. These relations of mutuality are preconditions for self-realization. Recognition and emancipation are connected and recognition becomes the foundation on which communicative action and emancipatory learning are based.

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