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EXTENDING HONNETH'S SHIFT IN FOCUS FOR CRITICAL THEORY

Axel Honneth has called for a change of focus in Critical Theory "from the self-generated independence of systems to the damage and distortion of social relations of recognition."[1] This important shift in focus from structural theoretical models to an exploration of the relations of recognition opens Critical Theory's inquiries to the processes of interpersonal interaction and communication. This is in keeping with Honneth's assertion that individuals' self-realization and autonomy depends on their experiences of social recognition; therefore, misrecognition is experienced as a threat to an individual's self-realization. However, I argue that Honneth does not shift his methodological focus enough to succeed in his goal of illuminating the social relations of recognition.

In this paper, I wish to focus on one aspect of Axel Honneth's vast work: Honneth's classification of recognition and misrecognition in terms of three structural spheres of recognition that correspond to Hegel's stages of social interaction—the legal, the economic, and the personal.[2] Honneth maps his three subspecies of recognition—self-respect, self-esteem, and self-confidence—respectively, to the legal, economic, and personal spheres. My broader research aim is to craft a methodology that will help us understand the reasons for occurrences of misrecognition behaviors that are injustices to others, and I am not convinced that Honneth's Hegelian-inspired typology is the best way to understand recognition and misrecognition. The question I am asking here is this: When we consider a particular behavior, does mapping the

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[1] Honneth 2007, p. 72.
[2] See, for example, Honneth's discussion in Honneth 1995b, pp. 18-28.

behavior onto the legal, the economic, and the personal spheres of recognition sufficiently illuminate what is going on? My answer is no. Though regulated directly by recognition norms, human behaviors and experiences are not directly linked to only one of Honneth's three structural spheres—in everyday life the spheres continually overlap and are interwoven. The complexity of everyday life means that recognition and misrecognition behaviors often cannot be mapped directly to one sphere of recognition.

A deeper analysis of several of Honneth's own examples of recognition behaviors shows they cannot be mapped exactly to his three structural spheres. I will pick two of his examples to illustrate. First is Honneth's example of recognition or misrecognition of workers on the basis of the level of economic compensation they receive from their employers. For Honneth, employees are recognized when their economic compensation matches their contributions, and he maps this contribution tracking directly to the economic sphere of civil society and the prestige and reputation received in that sphere.[3] But a company's gestures of recognition of employees, sincere or not, appeal to multiple dimensions of its employees' wants and needs, not simply economic ones, and involve combinations of legal, economic, and personal factors that cannot be placed in one or even two spheres. An employer can, for example, attempt to overcome an unjustly low level of economic compensation by appealing to workers' self-esteem by extolling their value or by appealing to their sense of duty to sacrifice for the greater good. Similarly, the experience of misrecognition in receiving an unjustly low level of economic compensation affects an individual worker not only in the economic sphere of self-esteem but also in combinations of self-respect, self-esteem, and self-confidence.

Similarly, Honneth's example of social ostracization[4] is a behavior that causes moral injuries not just to an individual's legal self-respect, but also to that individual's social self-esteem and personal self-confidence. It would seem insufficient to map social ostracization only to the legal sphere, Furthermore, Honneth's differentiation between modes of social solidarity and familial love into the separate spheres of the community and the family seems to separate recognition relations between

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[3] Honneth 2007, pp. 81-82, 92. Honneth 2012, pp. 78, 207.
[4] Honneth 1995a, pp. 254-255. Honneth 1995b, pp. 133-134.

individuals unnaturally. In the normative terms of recognition relations, solidarity within a community and love within a family are both emotional bonds of devotion, and Honneth does not make a compelling argument for his treatment of them as separate modes of recognition. If we shift the conversation to misrecognition, how would betrayal of a friend be a qualitatively different normative violation than betrayal of a family member? Would we not gain a better understanding of misrecognition by looking at the structure of betrayal rather than assuming a difference between family and friendship? If we focus on the misrecognition behaviors themselves more than on the social sphere in which they occur, we would we see that Honneth's formal mapping of recognition and misrecognition to spheres of social levels is inadequate. Particular recognition and misrecognition behaviors do not fall neatly into three subspecies.

Honneth's three spheres of recognition and misrecognition provide a top-down view that stems from his Hegelian picture of society as a macrosocial recognition order. This view leads Honneth to the idea that instances of misrecognition are best understood as stemming from endemic pathologies that occur within social institutions. Honneth's emphasis on institutional structures is a natural outgrowth of the legacy of Critical Theory, and the institutional inclination of his philosophy remains despite his moves to distance himself from systematic philosophies. Honneth's institutional emphasis is reflected in his holistic portrayal of social pathology. Honneth defines a social pathology as an organic aberration of social development that prevents members of a society from living a "good life"[5] or that "significantly impairs the ability to take part rationally in important forms of social cooperation."[6] Honneth is critical of "deplorable social states of affairs" not just because they are violations of principles of justice but also because they are disorders that, "like psychic illnesses, limit or deform possibilities of living taken to be 'normal' or 'healthy.'"[7] The concept of a pathology is used in critical social theory in the same way it is used in medicine or psychology—to identify that which hinders a body's or psyche's ability to function. Honneth believes, however, that unlike in medicine or

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[5] Honneth 2007, p. 4.
[6] Honneth 2013, p. 86.
[7] Honneth 2007, p. 35.

psychology, the concept of pathology in social theory cannot be spoken of strictly in terms of an individual but must be related to social life as a whole.[8] Honneth's reasoning for this is that because social norms are always culturally defined, our consideration of disorders of social norms must refer to society as a whole. Honneth emphasizes the importance of social norms and social relations of recognition for the health of individuals to achieve self-esteem and self-respect. It is consistent, therefore, for him to conceive of social pathologies in terms of deviations from the social conditions that enable human self-realization. Honneth thus focuses on the concrete social conditions and processes that are prerequisites for human self-realization, essentially linking social pathologies with disorders of these macrosocial social conditions and processes. Injustice, then, for Honneth is a systematic product of social institutions. Honneth's focus is, in terms of scale, on the macrosocial—society as a whole—a methodological focus that is traditional within Critical Theory.

Although Honneth maintains the macrosocial emphasis of his predecessors, he proposes a change in the focus of Critical Theory. Honneth observes that theoretical models that seek to define social interaction strictly in terms of structuralist or linguistic conditions cannot fully grasp the normative presuppositions of social interaction that are constituted by social recognition. Individuals, Honneth says, have normative expectations of social recognition and experience receiving recognition and misrecognition. Individuals' expectations and experiences are pretheoretical facts, Honneth says, meaning that individuals experience their world prior to any consideration of theory. He therefore argues that when social theory bases its critique on the relations of recognition rather than on linguistic-theoretical paradigms, it can better identify individuals' normative expectations involved in social interaction.[9] Honneth's proposed shift in critical focus reflects the reality that individuals' normative presuppositions, and their fulfillment or disappointment, are issues of relations of recognition as lived by social individuals.

Despite Honneth's shift to relations of recognition, he considers these relations in terms of the macrosocial spheres. In so doing, his view

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[8] Honneth 2007, p. 34.
[9] Honneth 2007, pp. 69-72.

of misrecognition remains functionalist—the individual is reduced to a functional role playing out macrosocial interactions. Honneth's theory does not sufficiently include the role of the autonomous individual, and this lack renders his shift in focus incomplete. A good illustration of Honneth's functionalist reduction is his portrayal of criminal acts. Danielle Petherbridge observes that Honneth's account of crime, which is based on his reading of Hegel, reduced crime to purely a pathology of recognition, [10] which within Honneth's picture, is a pathology of institutions. I agree with Petherbridge's assessment of Honneth's account as portraying misrecognition in "almost functionalist terms, merely as the means by which originary relations of recognition are revealed, as a 'disturbance' of already existing recognition relations."[11] The contradiction in Honneth's account of recognition and misrecognition is that on the one hand, he sees recognition as vital for an individual's autonomy, but, on the other hand, he places little importance on the individual's role in the relations of recognition and misrecognition that affect individuals. Honneth's macrosocial view reduces the individual to functionalist terms. One could argue in defense of this seeming contradiction that it is recognition that grants an individual the capacity for autonomous action and that without this recognition the individual is merely functional—merely reacting to stimulus without possessing individual autonomy. However, a lack of receiving recognition cannot alone account for why an individual would engage in a criminal act nor can criminal acts be reduced to negative responses to a lack of recognition. To be fair, Honneth probably is not intentionally committing himself to such a reductionism, but his account remains problematic in it not sufficiently including the role of the individual agent in human behavior such as criminal acts.

The question of crime is an example of how Honneth's spheres of recognition and misrecognition are limited by being too formally oriented to the three macrosocial spheres. Criminal acts are, by definition, within the legal sphere, but such acts do not occur strictly within legal forms of social relations and the motivation for criminal acts

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[10] Petherbridge 2013, p. 97.

[11] Petherbridge 2013, p. 98. Petherbridge, in this quote, specifically responds to Honneth's portrayal of criminal acts, but I think the criticism of functionalism applies to all of Honneth's forms of misrecognition.

cannot be reduced purely to the legal sphere of recognition. Criminal acts can occur within social or personal relations and have personal motivations, including negative feelings, revenge, resentment, and desire for power.[12] Victims of crime certainly suffer a legal moral injury, but they also suffer moral injuries to their self-esteem and their ability to trust others. Honneth partially acknowledges this, mentioning briefly that in resisting a perpetrator, victims of crime defend not only their legal rights but also their identity.[13] However, Honneth's account of misrecognition behaviors leans too heavily on the notion of institutional social misdevelopments as the cause for individual acts of injustice such as criminal acts and avoids the complex question of how the process of individual identity formation itself contributes to misrecognition behaviors. Institutional misrecognitions are undeniably important, but they do not exhaust the possibilities of misrecognition. There is also an individual level of misrecognition, or what Charles Taylor calls the intimate sphere, in contrast to a public sphere.[14] Regardless of the terms used, the significant difference between misrecognition in a broader social sphere and in a narrower personal sphere is worth exploring. I argue that an emphasis on institutional misrecognition misses key causes of, and indeed the very nature of, social pathologies. It is fair to say that Honneth does adopt a view of social action that includes the relations between individual actors, but I argue that he does not adopt this view sufficiently to include in his philosophy the individual as actor. Honneth's shift in focus to the individual needs to go deeper and include an exploration of the relation between the individual and misrecognition behaviors. For example. Honneth's account remains largely formal and functionalist and does not account adequately for how an individual proceeds from suffering misrecognition to engaging in a criminal act. I argue that, although Honneth is correct that misrecognition contributes to criminal acts, we would do well to consider the causes and effects of crime within a differently structured typology of recognition and misrecognition that takes individuals and their particular circumstances more into consideration.

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[12] Petherbridge 2013, p. 97.
[13] Honneth 1995b, p. 21.
[14] Taylor 1995, p. 233.

Despite Honneth's stated intention to avoid systematic theories of the social, he does not succeed entirely. His inclusion of the need to consider relations of recognition in Critical Theory is a contribution, but he underestimates the important roles that individuals play in recognition and misrecognition behaviors. Recognition is a relation between individuals, which means that the social norms of recognition must be applied by an individual and that the occurrence or nonoccurrence of recognition involves individuals. Without individuals acting, there is no recognition. I do not suggest that Honneth denies this, but he insufficiently explores its dimensions and implications. Honneth is not unaware of personal recognitions, but he includes them only in terms of his formal spheres of recognition, placing receiving recognition from other individuals predominantly within the sphere of family relationships—respect and esteem he sees coming predominantly from the state and civil society, respectively. I argue that individuals are involved in generating instances of recognition and misrecognition behaviors in all social spheres, and not only within family relationships as Honneth implies. Legal and civil society can act only through the actions of individuals.

I argue that Honneth's spheres and related subspecies of recognition are formal theoretical distinctions that, though valuable in helping us understand institutional recognition and misrecognition, do not do justice to the dynamics of intersubjective relations and personal recognition and misrecognition. The complexity of intersubjective experiences and identity formation calls for a more robust picture that reflects the complex and dynamic experiences of individuals in their social relations. An individual experiences recognition and misrecognition not in terms of formal categories but as specific instances of behavior in which that individual is involved. Although intersubjective relations of recognition and misrecognition occur according to social norms, these relations have an essential individual-centered nature. An individual's experiences of recognition and misrecognition are specific to that individual and his or her specific life. Rather than using Honneth's typological strategy of mapping recognition onto Hegel's formal spheres, I argue that it will be more fruitful to approach the analysis of recognition and misrecognition through the interpersonal recognition relations and behaviors themselves as experienced by the individuals involved.

Honneth includes the experiences of recognition as building blocks, or lack thereof, in individual autonomy, but he underplays the importance of the individual's role in the generation of recognition and misrecognition behaviors that affect others' autonomy. Institutional recognition plays an important part of individuals' lives, but so does personal recognition, and the boundary between the two is highly permeable. Honneth is correct about the importance of recognition for individual autonomy. This means that recognition and misrecognition are issues of importance in an individual's life. Our analysis needs to focus on individuals' experiences of recognition and misrecognition and the effects those experiences have on them. This change of approach would remedy Honneth's overemphasis on institutional recognition and misrecognition that leaves little room for consideration of the personal dimensions of recognition and misrecognition.

The Hegelian triad of social spheres is not a sufficient basis for an exploration of misrecognition behaviors. To understand misrecognition behaviors, we need to seek a picture of misrecognition that reflects the complex diversity of individuals' lived experiences and practices, gives sufficient attention to interpersonal recognition and misrecognition, and offers potential reasons for why individuals might engage in misrecognition behaviors. Given the intersubjective nature of recognition, our attention is properly focused on the individual who is immersed in a culture that provides the normative arena in which the individual acts and attempts to achieve self-realization and autonomy. An individual-level account of misrecognition will not be easy to craft because it entails going beyond reductionist theoretical systems and engaging in the complexities of individual experiences and responses to those experiences. However, because relations of recognition are relations between individuals, our analysis of the injustice of misrecognition also would have to look at the individuals involved, a dimension which is underrepresented in Honneth's account.

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ABSTRACT

Axel Honneth has called for a change of focus in Critical Theory "from the self-generated independence of systems to the damage and distortion of social relations of recognition." I argue that Honneth does not shift his methodological focus sufficiently to succeed in his goal of illuminating the social relations of recognition. Despite Honneth's shift to relations of recognition, he considers these relations in terms of the macrosocial Hegelian triad of social spheres of recognition. A deeper analysis of recognition behaviors shows they cannot be mapped exactly to these spheres. I conclude that the Hegelian triad of social spheres is an insufficient basis for an exploration of misrecognition behaviors. To understand misrecognition, we need to seek a picture of misrecognition that reflects the complex diversity of individuals' lived experiences and practices, gives sufficient attention to interpersonal recognition and misrecognition, and offers potential reasons for why individuals might engage in misrecognition behaviors.

KEYWORDS: Critical Theory, recognition
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