

The Diffusion of Disrespect

When a person is told to respect another, she will usually think that she must do it because of custom. When a person reaches her adult stage of life, she should respect the people with which she interacts. Axel Honneth thinks that there is more to respect than only social obligation: he thinks that a lack of it can harm individuals psychologically to various degrees. Yet Honneth does not call respect by its proper name; rather he calls it recognition. Honneth's theory of recognition is threefold with each part relating to a specific relation-to-self and the other people with which one interacts on various levels of social life. These levels or spheres of life are love, legal/political, and communal. Honneth calls these the relations of love, rights, and solidarity. In the first part of this paper, I discuss the intersubjective recognition of these three spheres and their yield for the individual's relation-to-self. When a person is loved, he has a basic self-confidence in his conduct in the world. When a person's rights are recognized, she has self-respect. And finally, when a person is esteemed in his community for his actions, he has self-esteem. Honneth claims that these three types of recognition are distinct in the individual's relation-to-self.

Honneth goes further than just stating the three patterns of recognition—he illustrates how one can be misrecognized according to each pattern. Such misrecognition is an act of disrespect towards the individual. With respect to love, physical abuse harms one's basic self-confidence; concerning rights, denying one's claims to certain rights harms one's self-respect; and in the sphere of solidarity, denying social approval of a person's way of self-realization harms that person's self-esteem. These disrespects cause negative relations-to-self, and in fact they indirectly point in the

direction of the theory of recognition. Nevertheless, it is my contention in this essay to cast doubt upon the distinctness of the three patterns of recognition and propose that the practical relation-to-self is of a more organic nature. At some points in Honneth's writings, it seems that he would agree with this proposal but it is not clear. To argue for this, I look at the respective disrespect of each pattern of recognition and illustrate their affect on the other patterns, thus showing their interaction in the practical relation-to-self.

Honneth's theory of recognition is based on people granting that others are what they claim themselves to be. A person feels recognized "only when one has learned to view oneself, from the normative perspective of one's partners in interaction, as their social addressee."¹ Hence, a person is recognized when others view her as she views herself and she is accepted by the others, and a person recognizes another when they accept how that person takes themselves to be. The three patterns of intersubjective recognition are love, rights, and solidarity and these "correspond...to distinct types of individual relations to self."²

Love is a pattern of recognition between two or slightly more people that is maintained through a strong emotional and affective bond. Examples of love relationships are friendships, familial relationships, and the erotic relationships of lovers. Being based on emotion, love can "only gain 'confirmation' by being satisfied or reciprocated...[with] affective approval or encouragement."³ Love relationships then must be expressed through action and words: they are "necessarily tied to the physical existence of concrete others who show each other feelings of particular esteem."⁴ On top of the show of feelings, proper love relationships maintain a balance between the

two people: “affectional attachment to other persons is revealed to be a process whose success is dependent on the mutual maintenance of a tension between symbiotic self-sacrifice and individual self-assertion.”⁵ Each person in the relationship needs to maintain the balance between his expressions of individuality and his devotion to his partner. For a successful love relationship, each individual must strike a balance between how much she gives of herself to the other and how much she individualizes herself from the other. In love, “recognition is here characterized by a double process, in which the other is released and, at the same time, emotionally tied to the loving subject.”⁶ Furthermore, “this relationship of recognition prepares the ground for a type of relation-to-self in which subjects mutually acquire basic confidence in themselves.”⁷ When a person is loved, she is supported by another and that gives her self-confidence in her actions. Thus, recognition in love is achieved through an emotional and physical bond that allows a balance between a person’s individuality and devotion to the other, and each person will feel confident in herself.

Rights are a pattern of recognition whereby all autonomous individuals respect the rights-claims of all other autonomous individuals, and this is based on a social structure of equality. Honneth declares that

in legal recognition, two operations of consciousness flow together...since, on the one hand, it presupposes moral knowledge of the legal obligations that we must keep vis-à-vis autonomous persons, while, on the other hand, it is only an empirical interpretation of the situation that can inform us whether, in the case of a given concrete other, we are dealing with an entity possessed of the quality that makes these obligations applicable.⁸

Each person must know that for which he is legally responsible and then be able to interpret whether he is obliged to the people he meets to act on such responsibility. The legal responsibility shows the way to the rights that others claim: all legal persons have

the responsibility not to infringe on another's rights. Through the historical process, "individual rights have become detached from concrete role expectations because they must...be ascribed in principle to every human individual as a free being."⁹ Hence rights are ascribed to every human being and they are all viewed as free.

Autonomy is the key to rights:

If a legal order can be considered to be valid and, moreover, can count on the willingness of individuals to follow laws only to the extent to which it can appeal, in principle, to the free approval of all the individuals it includes, then one must be able to suppose that these legal subjects have at least the capacity to make reasonable, autonomous decisions regarding moral questions.¹⁰

Rights are based on all individuals freely agreeing on granting every free person whatever right is in question. The free granting of rights is what binds individuals to adhere to the agreement and law. Consequently, legal recognition allows an individual "to view oneself as a person who shares with all other members of one's community the qualities that make participation in discursive will-formation possible."¹¹ The recognition of another's rights is the recognition of that person's autonomous capacity to participate in society by recognizing other people's rights. In the end, the recognition of one's rights provides one with self-respect: "since possessing rights means being able to raise socially accepted claims, the provide one with a legitimate way of making clear to oneself that one is respected by everyone else."¹² By being recognized as a bearer of rights, one feels self-respect and this is reciprocated to others when one recognizes others as rights bearers.

The final pattern of recognition is solidarity, which provides one with self-esteem. Solidarity is concerned with recognition of individual's particular qualities that are deemed as worthy by other individuals within a community. "The fundamental,

universalistic principle underlying these relations could only be reconstructed by conceiving of them as the outcome of an uncoupling of legal recognition from the forms of social regard in which subjects are recognized according to the socially defined worth of their concrete characteristics.”¹³ At the present state of society where individuals have rights and are free, individuals’ attributes are recognized by others in their community to have worth for their community. Further, solidarity presupposes that individuals “form a community of value”¹⁴ in which those values determine the recognized worth of individuals. “The cultural self-understanding of a society provides the criteria that orient the social esteem of persons, because their abilities and achievements are judged intersubjectively according to the degree to which they can help to realize culturally defined values.”¹⁵ Hence, a community of solidarity will have certain goals in which each individual’s worth will be judged by others for how well their mode of self-realization accomplishes those socially defined goals. Honneth says that solidarity “is the all-dominating agreement on a practical goal that instantly generates an intersubjective value-horizon, in which each participant learns to recognize the significance of the abilities and traits of the others to the same degree.”¹⁶ Solidarity is a state where all individuals are esteemed by all others for their mode of self-realization that achieves a socially defined goal.

Moreover, individuals receiving social esteem from others internalize a sense of self-esteem for their actions and way of life. Honneth claims that “subjects always need...a form of social esteem that allows them to relate positively to their concrete traits and abilities.”¹⁷ The social esteem received in solidarity allows one to relate to their mode of self-realization in a positive manner. For example, if an artist is

celebrated for her creations, she will be able to relate to her being-an-artist in a positive way and feel proud for her contributions to her society. Self-esteem is feeling oneself as valuable for one's own particular qualities: "persons can feel themselves to be 'valuable' only when they know themselves to be recognized for accomplishments that they precisely do not share in an undifferentiated manner with others."¹⁸ Solidarity is a social state that yields its individuals the practical relation-to-self of self-esteem.

Honneth's three distinct patterns of recognition are love, rights, and solidarity. When one is loved one is tied emotionally to another or a small group of others and one is recognized as an individual and as dependent on the other in a balanced way, and vice versa for the other. Moreover, being loved provides one with self-confidence. For rights, one is entitled to rights-claims when one is recognized as free and recognizes the obligation to not infringe on another's rights; this provides one with self-respect. And for solidarity, one is recognized as being valuable to society and one recognizes others as being valuable to society; this provides one with self-esteem. Accompanying these positive relations to self are distinct disrespects that infringe on their respective recognition patterns. The disrespects "are able to disrupt a person's practical relation-to-self by denying him or her recognition for particular claims to identity."¹⁹ These disrespects are important to my argument because "'human dignity' can only be ascertained indirectly by determining the forms of personal degradation and injury."²⁰ The disrespects lead indirectly to the three patterns of recognition: "this differentiation of three basic forms of disrespect will...yield indirect insights into the totality of experiences of recognition on which a person depends for the safeguarding of his integrity."²¹ The three forms of disrespect are physical abuse (related to recognition

through love), denying rights-claims (related to rights), and evaluative degradation (related to solidarity). Once I have explained these three forms of disrespect, I will illustrate how these disrespects are not limited to their respective recognition pattern and suggest that the practical relation-to-self is an organic interweaving of the three patterns.

The type of disrespect that relates to the recognition pattern of love is physical injury.²² Honneth states that “physical abuse represents a type of disrespect that does lasting damage to one’s basic self-confidence (learned through love) that one can autonomously co-ordinate one’s own body.”²³ Instances of physical abuse lead to a lack of trust in oneself and the world. As a result, “this type of disrespect deprives one of...the taken-for-granted respect for the autonomous control of one’s own body, which itself could only be acquired at all through experiencing emotional support as part of the socialization process;”²⁴ and exemplified in abuses like torture and rape, physical harm “lastingly destroy[s] the most fundamental form of practical relation-to-self, namely, one’s underlying trust in oneself.”²⁵ Disrespect in the form of physical abuse can destroy one’s self-confidence.

The disrespect that relates to the recognition of rights is the denying of rights-claims. Honneth means by this that an individual is “being structurally excluded from the possession of certain rights within a society.”²⁶ By denying a person a certain right that she claims to have implies that she “is not being accorded the same degree of moral responsibility as other members of society.”²⁷ This leads the individual to feeling like she is not “capable of forming moral judgments”²⁸ and not a totally recognized

partner in interaction. As a result of this form of disrespect that does not allow one to relate legally to other people, it “brings with it a loss of self-respect.”²⁹

Lastly, the disrespect that relates to the pattern of recognition found in solidarity is evaluative degradation. This type of disrespect concerns the negative evaluation of one’s mode of self-realization by others. Honneth claims that

if this hierarchy of values [in a given society] is so constituted as to downgrade individual forms of life and manners of belief as inferior or deficient, then it robs the subjects in question of every opportunity to attribute social value to their own ability. For those engaged in them, the result of the evaluative degradation of certain patterns of self-realization is that they cannot relate to their mode of life as something of positive significance within their community.³⁰

If individuals feel like they offer nothing of worth to the society of which they are a part because the society does not value their particular actions, then it motivates in the individuals “a loss of personal self-esteem.”³¹ Now that the three disrespects have been outlined, I will provide instances of each that affect not only their proper relations to self, but the others as well.

The instances I will use are the case of the mother-child relationship that Honneth outlines in object-relations theory for physical abuse, Heikki Ikaheimo’s scheme of rights in recognition for the denial of rights, and a basic example of an adolescent who is made fun of at school for evaluative degradation. Honneth looks at object-relations theory as empirical evidence for the formation of love relationships and self-confidence. When a child is born the mother and her child feel as one symbiotic entity. For the child, “it is only in the protective space of ‘being held’ that infants can learn to coordinate their sensory and motor experiences around a single centre and thereby to develop a body-scheme.”³² In the symbiotic shape of the mother-child, the child begins to learn of her body under the protection of being held—she starts to

individualize herself. A little while after the child's birth, the mother begins to live her own life again, not obsessing over the child every moment of her life. In this new space the child begins to gain a sense of the objective world and "can come to recognize the 'mother,' unambivalently, as 'an entity in its own right.'"³³ At the end of the mother-child maturation process, "the child is able to reconcile its (still symbiotically supported) devotion to the 'mother' with the experience of standing on its own."³⁴ The child will have basic self-confidence if this process of love is successful. The recognition of another through love, yielding self-confidence, "is both conceptually and genetically prior to every other form of reciprocal recognition."³⁵ Hence, the recognition pattern of love is prior to all other forms of recognition because it yields the self-confidence that is required by the others.

However, if the mother were not there to 'hold' the child and care for it, then it seems that the child in the later stages of life would not be able to conduct herself in a way that is appropriate to the other patterns of recognition. Since basic self-confidence must be prior to any other positive relation-to-self and if a child was not loved by his mother, then she, based on Honneth's claims, cannot gain those practical relations-to-self that rights and solidarity yield. A child that was not loved is limited in his relations-to-self. In addition, not being loved by one's mother is analogous to the disrespect of physical abuse: it destroys the possibility for self-confidence. Hence, the lack of self-confidence in the child as a result of being disrespected by his mother affects the other relations-to-self of self-respect and self-esteem. The child is unable to *confidently* advance into the other areas of social life. The physically disrespected child, due to the mother's actions, cannot properly gain from rights and solidarity that which she could

have if she had been loved. Physical disrespect extends beyond its respective relation-to-self of self-confidence and love into the other two relations.

The next form of disrespect I will discuss is the denial of rights, but first I must explain Ikaheimo's scheme of rights that he uses to clarify Honneth's recognition of rights. Ikaheimo contests that "not all rights are conditional on autonomy"³⁶ as Honneth has claimed. Ikaheimo argues that there are three forms of rights: they apply to a person as such, or as a person that would be loved regardless of particular features, to a person's autonomy, and to a person's particularity, or particular social value. For the rights of a person as such, Ikaheimo looks at the 'rights to life' that all people have: "seriously retarded or demented, and hence minimally autonomous persons are taken as having these rights in most Western societies."³⁷ Even though a person has limited autonomy or rational capability, he still is entitled to the right to live because he is a human being. Hence, there are rights for a person as such and not only for free persons. For the rights of a person as being autonomous, Ikaheimo pretty well follows Honneth idea of the entitlement of rights. However, for the rights of particularity or modes of self-realization, Ikaheimo looks at the right to express oneself. Individuals have the right to express themselves however they want as long as they do not harm others. Ikaheimo mentions same sex relationships and says about rights of particularity that if they are "in some sense valuable (or at least not harmful) to the society"³⁸ then those people are worthy of esteem. Just because a person is homosexual does not mean that she cannot contribute to society, hence she is worthy of social esteem and has a right to express herself as homosexual. Overall, Ikaheimo argued that rights are not only about autonomy but also about a person as a singularity and a particularity.

I will illustrate now that by disrespecting a person by denying him the rights of singularity and particularity, his relations-to-self of confidence and esteem respectively are harmed. Concerning the right of singularity, Ikaheimo provides an example of “the right of not being killed by another person,”³⁹ but this can be tamed down to the right to not be brutally beaten by another person. If someone were to be beaten up to the extent that he almost lost his life, then he would lose his self-confidence in protecting himself. This experience would bring one to “the point of feeling that one has been deprived of reality,”⁴⁰ which would be similar to the psychological results of torture or rape. Thus, the denial of one’s right to life affects one’s self-confidence. In addition, the right to express oneself as one views oneself and being socially esteemed for being oneself provides self-esteem. Yet, if one is degraded for how one expresses oneself, then they will feel a loss of self-esteem. If this occurred, one would not only be socially degraded but denied the right to express oneself. Thus, denying certain rights extends beyond self-respect and can also affect one’s self-confidence and self-esteem.

The last example I will provide for my argument is an adolescent who is constantly made fun of at school. I acknowledge that this example is my weakest, yet I think it is highly plausible. Imagine a teenage boy who is constantly ridiculed at school for everything, but in particular because he is not good at sports. As a result, the boy will suffer from a loss of self-esteem because he is not valued by his peers. The loss of self-esteem, for the boy, can negatively affect the other relations-to-self. We can imagine the boy going home and locking himself in his room because he is depressed, thus becoming too independent in his relationships with his parents causing an imbalance. Or the boy could become even more dependent on his parents, reverting to

his childhood when he wasn't in school. Either way, the relationship the boy had with his parents has become unhealthy as a result of a loss of self-esteem and, ultimately, he has lost his self-confidence. In the same vein, if the boy has no self-esteem why would he put himself into legal decision-making processes that require strong self-respect? The boy might not recognize himself to be legally equal since he has not been adequately appreciated at school. In the end, I think that it is highly plausible that if a person has lost her self-esteem, then that would affect her other relationships and eventually have a negative affect on the other relations-to-self.

I think that these instances are strong enough to cast doubt on Honneth's claim that the three patterns of recognition are distinct. Instead, it seems that recognition and the lack of it, in the form of disrespect, spreads throughout the self. I believe that Honneth's demarcations function well analytically (except in the case of rights), but in practical matters they cannot be separated to the extent that he describes. Of course, there are different types of relationships that a person has in life, but the affects of those relationships spread out in the person's being. If one is loved very much, that may give one a sense of self-esteem to a certain extent even though many people may degrade one. In the end, it seems that the psychological self as constituted by the patterns of recognition functions rather organically instead of the three patterns being distinct. As my examples showed, disrespect causes much more harm to an individual than to just one relation-to-self. Disrespect can spread throughout an individual causing their whole life to collapse, rather than one aspect of it. I think that by looking at the relations-to-self and their respective disrespects organically it offers a more realistic image of human life than Honneth's systematic breakdown. Therefore, I think I have sufficiently cast doubt

on Honneth's claim that the three patterns of recognition are distinct from each other and I have argued that the practical relation-to-self is an organic structure of Honneth's three relations.

It was argued that the patterns of recognition are not so distinct from each other in an existent self and that the practical relations-to-self have a more organic nature. To support this thesis, I first outlined Honneth's three patterns of recognition, namely, love, rights and solidarity, and their corresponding practical relations-to self—self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. Following from that, when one is not recognized, one is disrespected and each pattern has a particular type of disrespect. For love, it was physical harm; for rights, it was the denial of rights-claims; and for solidarity, it was evaluative degradation. With these disrespects in hand, it was argued that they actually extend beyond the limits that Honneth had set for them, implying that the patterns of recognition function in an organic fashion rather than each being distinct from the others. This conclusion leaves much work to be done to see what effects this organic structure of the self has on Honneth's theory of recognition, yet I think it clarifies how recognition functions practically in a person's life.

¹ Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge: Polity, 1995), 92.

² *Ibid.*, 95.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 95-96.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 112-113.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

²⁰ Axel Honneth, "Integrity and Disrespect: Principles of a Conception of Morality Based on the Theory of Recognition," *Political Theory* 20, no. 2 (1992): 187.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 188.

²² This includes emotional injury as well.

²³ Honneth, *Struggle for Recognition*, 132.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 134.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 134.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 99.

³³ *Ibid.*, 101.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

³⁶ Heikki Ikaheimo, "On the Genus and Species of Recognition," *Inquiry* 45 (2002): 454.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 455.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 456.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 454.

⁴⁰ Honneth, *Struggle for Recognition*, 132.