Towards an understanding of access and retention in higher education

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The predominance of the themes of respect, confidence and self-esteem in the interviews undertaken as part the RANLHE research project has been both striking and thought provoking. This has forced us to reconsider what is at stake when students talk about gaining recognition and social validation through studying in Higher Education institutions. The students we spoke to were clearly not seeking status or prestige alone but rather recognition, which touches on *both* one's 'private' sense of self and one's 'public' self. Intersubjective recognition, which is expressed and reciprocated in complex and varied ways, has emerged as a key theme in our data and has been central in students' accounts of their motivation for applying to college and their determination 'to stay the course' once they got there. Analysing how the struggle for recognition has informed students' choices, strategies and practices has offered us some new insights about the successful formation of learner identity, student motivation and retention. We are now in the process of identifying the broader pedagogical, institutional and social implications. What is *not* being proposed is that *all* the issues that have emerged from a grounded examination of the data can be understood under the rubric of recognition but simply that this is one highly significant and under-theorised aspect of student experience that merits careful consideration.

It should be mentioned that the extent to which students have chosen to foreground these issues in their stories has surprised us. In the first phase of our research we did not anticipate the importance of this issue (Johnston, et al., 2009; RANLHE, 2009). Our sensitising concepts reflected our previous engagement with critical theory, critical pedagogy, social psychology and the reflexive sociology of Pierre Bourdieu. So although the intersubjective, historical and value ridden nature of social life was emphasised the issues of respect and self-esteem were marginal.

However, when the interviewees explored their experience of Higher Education in relation to their broader life history these issues surfaced repeatedly and emphatically. Most commonly people discussed how the decision to come to college was informed by a desire for recognition that was rooted in some perceived lack or undeveloped capability which was often rooted in the experience of disrespect at school or at work. For instance Katy, now in her 30s, talked about her working class background and 'turbulent family life' which meant she was not given proper care and attention at school. '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 but not wholly satisfying career after school in the corporate sector 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'. Over the past two years in university she has flourished and as a consequence has a stronger sense of self-esteem, agency and autonomy. This confirmation of her

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learner identity means she is considering doing a postgraduate degree and has bolstered her desire for a different and in her terms more socially valuable form of work. Now she says 'I have aspirations of helping in such a way of recognizing in others the reasons they are not achieving…… That I would be someone who would recognize and realize there is a different way' Although Katy's story has it own specific nuances and texture it is in many ways typical. In analysing such a story it is impossible to ignore that it is underpinned by the logic of intersubjective recognition and that in her reflections on both her private and public self Katy constantly uses confidence, self-esteem, respect as key terms. However, in listening to stories such as this we realised that these various terms were interrelated but not synonymous and that we needed to make an effort to understand the relationship between these terms, the evaluative frameworks on which they are based and that require considerable theoretical elaboration.

In trying to make sense of such data we turned to the ideas of Axel Honneth (1995; 2003; 2005) whose philosophically rich and ambitious work on recognition has proved useful on a number of counts. Firstly, it deals with the themes of respect and esteem which emerged from the empirical data in a nuanced and considered way and offers a way of theorising the social sources of recognition and disrespect. Secondly, it offered a theoretical bridge that allowed us to problematise and reflect upon our initial sensitising concepts alongside the empirical data in order to build theory.

The choice of Honneth is of course not accidental and his intellectual trajectory towards his theory of recognition was hardly irrelevant to our choice. Honneth was a student of Jürgen Habermas at Munich and has worked at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt (the Frankfurt School). As a consequence Honneth's work is strongly marked and shaped by an attempt to think with and against the insights of Habermas and to critically engage with the complex intellectual legacy of critical theory. In particular, he develops Habermas' contention that human development can only be achieved intersubjectively through free communication and this is expanded to emphasise the key role of recognition and respect in this process. For Honneth the need and desire for recognition preceeds communication and the theory relies less on cognitive rationality than Habermas' model.

Honneth 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 (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).

Drawing on Hegel, Honneth 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 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 Fraser & Honneth, 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, if perhaps not all, 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, the object relations psychology of Donald Winnicott and, less explicitly, a novel use of Foucault's genealogy of modernity.

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..
Relations of friendship & love	Self-confidence	Care	Parents, carers
Recognised as autonomous person with rights	Self-respect	Recognise legal rights	School
Performance of ones freedom and autonomy through work = how the community values one's contribution	Self-esteem	Recognise the contribution of others	Society (incl adult and higher education

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

The first of the three forms of relating is self-confidence, according to Honneth, 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 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).

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 absence of autonomy is price paid for the absence of this recognition. Again, this is clearly linked to the development and growth of discourses and practices that are specific to modernity and were articulated 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 is the performance of 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 with 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's work becomes a strong feeling of solidarity in the community and these 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.

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	Social integrity And treated as an object	

		employment rights		
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

It is not surprising to have three 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 they 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. In Mead's language there is a 'collapse of identity'. For instance, if one 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.

If we consider both the form and content of Katy's story (outlined earlier), which was a narrative of learning embodied in a wider life history, it is clear how a differentiated theory of recognition might help to illuminate why and how she has decided to stay the course at college. It might also be worth considering the narrative of Laura a middle aged student in her final year of university who told a story of significant disadvantage including periods of long-term institutionalization as an adult. Her childhood was a period of serious poverty with only primary school providing some positive experiences.

Her journey to university commenced in a workshop for adults. A supervisor encouraged her to return to education by recognising that she had 'something.' The support though modest (a series of books given as gifts) were 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.

The phrase 'they can see something' was repeated a number of times in her narrative and it gave her the experience that 'someone might take me seriously.' In such vignettes are stories told of moments of recognition, often out of proportion to the intention or knowledge of the one who provides the recognition. These moments are profoundly developmental.

In addition they hint strongly that if HE is to, in turn, provide an environment in which students can thrive and shine, then such moments of recognition need to be turned into pedagogical experiences of recognition.

Of course there are weaknesses in Honneth's theory not least in terms of his conception of social power, his understanding of the dynamics of political economy

and the way these things are mediated in everyday life (see Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Sayer, 2005; Thompson, 1991 for alternative ways of framing some of these issues). Finally, the research thus far has concentrated on grasping the logic and grammar of the students' narratives. Sociological study cannot restrict itself to an 'account of accounts' which is ultimately based on the idea that experiential and phenomenological knowledge will offer a complete description of the social world. As a consequence, before the study is concluded we will need to analyse these narratives through and against other forms of sociological knowledge (Finnegan, 2010). However, our contention is that such work can be best done if the internal logic of people's lives is properly understood in all its complexity and in this case it means understanding the importance of recognition.

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