

Towards a Critical Theory of Access and Retention in Irish Higher Education

Ted Fleming and Fergal Finnegan, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, Ireland

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The themes of respect, confidence and self-esteem emerging in the interviews undertaken as part the RANLHE research project have been both striking and thought provoking. This has forced us to reconsider what is at stake when students talk about studying in university. 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 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.' This has offered us some new insights about the successful formation of learner identity, student motivation and retention. We are 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 that this is one highly significant and under-theorised aspect of student experience that merits careful consideration.

The extent to which students have chosen to foreground these issues in their stories has surprised us. Our sensitising concepts reflected our previous engagement with critical theory, critical pedagogy, social psychology and the reflexive sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (Johnston et al., 2009).

The interviewees 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....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 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 has flourished and as a consequence has a stronger sense of self-esteem, agency and autonomy. This confirmation of her learner identity means she is considering a postgraduate degree and has bolstered her desire for a different and in her view 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 it is typical. It is underpinned by the logic of intersubjective recognition and in her reflections on both her private and public self she uses confidence, self-esteem, respect as key terms.

However, we realised that these various terms were interrelated but not synonymous and that we needed 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) whose philosophically rich and ambitious work on recognition has proved useful. 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). His work is shaped in 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.

Honneth argues that for humans to achieve a productive relationship with themselves (an identity) humans require an intersubjective recognition of their abilities and achievements (1995, p.92). This is the foundation of moral consciousness and society as a whole and one develops a morality in the context of the reactions (positive and negative) one receives from another person 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).

Honneth argues that there are three differentiated recognition orders in modern society the development of which are crucial to understanding the dynamics and history of capitalism and modernity. Each social sphere is defined by the different forms of recognition needs. 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 2003, p.161). This is not simply an adaptation of Hegel as the theory is layered and stripped of some, if perhaps not all, of the metaphysical abstraction of German Idealist philosophy. 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.

Self-confidence is the first form of relating to self and 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 develops. 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 and a positive image of one's abilities is developed. This Hegelian concept of being reconciled with others was developed by both Dewey and

Mead and is 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 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. 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).

Self-respect is the second type of relationship to self and develops when a person in a community of rights is given recognition as a morally and legally mature person. Respect is shown to other people by relating to 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. Securing the rights of the individual is viewed by Honneth as an important social gain thus he holds a more optimistic conception of modernity than the earlier critical theorists.

The experience of being honoured leads to a form of self-relation that Honneth calls self-esteem the third form of recognition. The dilemma for the person is whether the community will honour their contribution through work. 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).

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 employment rights	Social integrity And treated as an object	
Self-esteem	Community of practice, respect & solidarity	Bullying, ignoring, excluding, constant negative feedback	Honour, dignity,	

Table 1 Honneth's Forms of Relating to Self and Forms of Recognition

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.

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. Abuse, insults, ignoring people, 'put downs' and mudslinging will not only be an injustice (harms people and denies civil rights) but injuries are done to their understanding of themselves, their identity.

From Katy's story (outlined earlier) a differentiated theory of recognition might help to illuminate why and how she has decided to stay at university. Consider Laura, a middle aged student in her final year of university. She told a story of significant disadvantage including periods of long-term institutionalization as an adult. Her childhood was a period of serious poverty. 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.' Such stories tell of moments of recognition and these moments are profoundly developmental. In addition they hint strongly that if HE is to provide an environment in which students can thrive, then these moments need to be turned into pedagogical experiences of recognition.

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. 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 by understanding the importance of recognition.

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