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# Honneth, Butler and the Ambivalent Effects of Recognition

## Introduction

This paper explores the ambivalent effects of recognition through a critical examination of Axel Honneth's theory of recognition.<sup>1</sup> Situating Honneth's account within a broader deficit model of recognition, I demonstrate how his underlying perfectionist commitments and his focus on the psychic effects of recognition lead him to overlook important connections between recognition, power and institutions. Specifically, I argue that he ignores ways in which recognition functions to produce and regulate particular forms of identity, which leaves him inattentive to certain dangers inherent within socio-institutional patterns of recognition. These claims are substantiated through (i) Butler's theory of performativity and recognition; and (ii) certain dynamics involved in the recognition of 'trans' gender identities. I then consider Honneth's recent rejoinder to the criticism that he does not adequately theorise the connections between recognition and power. I argue that he misrepresents what is at stake through his focus on recognition as a process of psychological development and the importance of individual self-realisation. I conclude by suggesting that, whilst Butler's account of recognition is generally compelling, it can be bolstered by attending more to Foucault's analyses of institutional practices of recognition and less on the linguistic construction of the subject. This, I argue, is the most promising way to conceptualise the complex, ambivalent effects of recognition and its connection with power.

## Axel Honneth and the 'Deficit' Model of Recognition

Following McBride (2013), we can identify a number of theorists who advocate a 'deficit' model of recognition.<sup>2</sup> This model, which incorporates both multicultural (e.g. Taylor 1994) and critical theory (e.g. Honneth 1995) accounts of recognition, depicts 'a relationship between someone

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<sup>1</sup> Several of the ideas expressed here are developed from McQueen (forthcoming 2015).

<sup>2</sup> These would include Honneth (1995; 2003), Taylor (1994), Fraser (1997; 2003) and arguably Kymlicka (1995).

who lacks recognition, claiming it from another who has the power to remedy this recognition deficit by granting the recognition which is sought' (McBride 2013, p. 6). A central feature of the deficit model is that it approaches issues of injustice or oppression as stemming from a lack, absence or distorted form of recognition. Consequently, the solution to such issues lies in either (a) expanding or adjusting current patterns of recognition; or (b) instantiating forms of recognition where they were previously withheld. Social problems are not seen to stem from the mechanics of recognition itself, but rather consist in problematic forms of recognition. Thus, the solution to problems of recognition is identified as improved forms of recognition (in other words, more and improved recognition to replace the existing, problematic recognition).

The dynamics of the deficit model are identifiable in the work of Axel Honneth, who has produced the most comprehensive and influential theory of recognition to date. Like Taylor (1994), Honneth (1995) believes that the value of recognition lies in its connection to self-realisation. However, he draws more explicitly on Hegelian intersubjectivity in order to identify the mechanics of how this is achieved, as well as establishing the motivational and normative role recognition can play in understanding and justifying social movements. Honneth produces a phenomenology of social pathology in which experiences of disrespect are used to explain and justify socio-political demands for recognition. The feelings of injustice that motivate individuals to engage in social struggles are rooted in a sense of misrecognition or non-recognition, with such feelings arising from the normative expectations for mutual recognition that underlie our intersubjective relations. His account is thus grounded in a philosophical anthropology that explains all social struggles (regardless of time and place) through the psychological need for, and expectation of, recognition.

Following Hegel, Honneth identifies three 'spheres of interaction' which are connected to the three 'patterns of recognition' required for an individual to develop a positive relation-to-self. These are love, rights, and solidarity (Honneth 1995, pp. 92-130; Honneth 2007a, pp. 129-142). All three spheres of recognition are vital if we are to become autonomous, individualised people:

For it is only due to the cumulative acquisition of basic self-confidence, of self-respect, and of self-esteem... that a person can come to see himself or herself, unconditionally, as

both an autonomous and an individuated being and to identify with his or her goals and desires. (Honneth 1995, p. 169).

Honneth's idea of autonomy – which he defines as the capacity to lead one's own life (Anderson and Honneth 2005) – is thus tied to a psychological account of personal development in which we progress through each recognitive stage, developing the self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem necessary to relate to ourselves as fully individualised, moral and self-determining subjects. As noted above, Honneth asserts that humans have an inherent need and desire for recognition, referring to these as the “quasi-transcendental interests” of the human race’ (Honneth 2003, p. 174). This allows him to conceive of society as a recognition order structured around institutionalising the appropriate relations of recognition conducive to the self-realisation of all members of that society. Consequently, societal change can be assessed as a developmental process, albeit not an inevitable one, driven by the moral claims arising from experiences of disrespect, with the normative direction of this change being determined by the extent to which it fosters the conditions for mutual recognition and self-realisation (Honneth 2007a). The result is that the progress of a society is judged according to the degree of social integration and individualisation obtained through its expanded and improved recognition relations (Honneth 2004, p. 360)

These remarks are sufficient to show why Honneth's account can be characterised as a deficit model. Firstly, our primal need and desire for recognition means that, when these needs and desires go unsatisfied, we are compelled to struggle in order to rectify this lack (i.e. deficit). Secondly, the solution to problems of misrecognition or non-recognition consists in the expansion or improvement of existing recognition relations. According to McBride (2013, p. 6) the deficit model ‘offers a seriously truncated snapshot of relations of recognition. In particular, it diverts our attention away from questions of power and authority’. This echoes a common complaint about Honneth's work, namely that he offers an inadequate account of power and recognition, and their respective relationships to agency and identity-formation (McNay 2008; Markell 2004; cf. van den Brink and Owen 2007).

Despite the frequency of this complaint, there is little agreement on (a) precisely which elements of Honneth's theory cause him to inadequately theorise power; and (b) how we could better conceptualise the relationship between recognition and power. In the following section, I argue that a root cause of Honneth's problems is his commitment to a perfectionist account of the self and his focus on the phenomenology of recognition. Both these issues lead him to overlook the ways in which recognition (i) functions to produce viable and unviable identities; and (ii) is intertwined with processes of exclusion and normalisation. Consequently, I suggest that we turn instead to Butler's theory of recognition and gender performativity, as it is better able to account for the ambivalent dynamics of recognition and its intertwinement with the regulation and normalisation of identity. Importantly, this involves moving away from Honneth's perfectionist model of self-making and toward an account of recognition as a regulatory social practice.

### **Recognition as Self-Realisation and the Problem of Perfectionism**

One of Honneth's primary concerns is with the psychological experiences of recognition and its connection to human development and flourishing. Specifically, he seeks to articulate the conditions within which healthy interpersonal social relationships can obtain, grounded in mutual recognition relations of love, respect and esteem. There is thus a perfectionist account underlying this position, which leads Honneth to tie recognition to an overall concept of psychic health. Recognition is deployed by Honneth as the means through which self-realisation can be secured (i.e. the integrated individual who has smoothly and successfully transitioned through the three modes of recognition, culminating in full personhood). Misrecognition and/or non-recognition are considered a social harm precisely because they inhibit this personal development and positive relation-to-self. The result is a reductive understanding of recognition that fails to attend adequately to important ways that recognition functions within normalising and disciplinary discourses and practices. In particular, he overlooks how recognition produces particular identities as viable and unviable, and the attendant

struggles experienced by individuals who find themselves rendered unrecognisable by the available norms of a particular socio-symbolic system.

Honneth's account of recognition follows the interpretation of Hegel as reviving an Aristotelian model of the self. However, as Pippin (2008, p. 17) cogently argues, 'Hegel's self-making model is not derived from Aristotelian notions of natural growth and maturation into some flourishing state, but from a claim about the self-legislated character of all normativity' (cf. Pinkard 2012). This alternative reading of Hegel – from Honneth's conception of recognition as self-realisation to Pippin's idea of recognition as practical reason-giving – is pivotal. The emphasis on the conditions of personal flourishing and psychic health produces a developmental model of recognition in which we could all, in theory, enjoy being fully integrated individuals through securing institutionalised relations of recognition that are mutually exchanged with one another.<sup>3</sup> However, such an account does not attend sufficiently to issues of normative authority and power; that is, the ways in which we are enmeshed in a matrix of norms that shape the conditions of our existence as social entities. Rather than focusing exclusively on psychic processes and experiences of self-making, we need to analyse how recognition orients us within a given social space and the role that authority and power play in this (Pinkard 1996; 2012; McBride 2013). In particular, we should approach recognition through / as socio-institutional practices of subject-formation, disconnected from the phenomenological structure of such recognition.

Importantly, there is no guarantee that we will be able to identify with a set of available norms that collectively constitute our identity, and nor is it a given that different identities will easily cohere with one another within a given normative order (Connolly 2002). Hence, there will be struggles for and against recognition which have no clear direction or outcome. If this is the case, then living with recognition will consist, at least partly, in living with its limitations and ambivalent effects, rather than continually striving to rectify a particular recognition deficit. To give an example that is developed later, the recognition struggles faced by many transgender individuals cannot be reduced to an inhibition of one's natural capacities for self-realisation and autonomy. Rather, they

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<sup>3</sup> One problematic implication of Honneth's perfectionist, developmental model is that it gives the impression that the work of recognition is done once we have received sufficient amounts of love, respect and esteem (McBride 2013, p. 139). Although Honneth denies that this is the case, it is not clear why according to his own account. Accordingly, we should not think of recognition struggles as directed toward some ideal *telos* of stable recognition relations and integrated identities, but rather as ongoing, unpredictable and agonistic processes often aimed at contesting the terms of recognition and identity themselves (cf. Tully 2000).

centre upon finding oneself unable or unwilling to identify with a set of norms which dictate the possible forms of intelligible identities available, and the effects that having to identify with such norms can have on one's ability to shape one's identity in ways that one feels able to live with. This calls for a more nuanced response than Honneth's strategy of expanding the relations of recognition to those currently not receiving sufficient respect, esteem and love. It highlights the need to interrogate the conditions of intelligible and viable identities; that is, to question what possible modes of identification are produced by existing norms, and to establish strategies for resignifying such norms.

### **The Role of Power and Recognition in Subject-Formation**

To get a handle on the connections between power, recognition and subjectivity, it is instructive to turn to Judith Butler's account of gender performativity and the role that recognition plays in it. This will provide a critical perspective on Honneth's model, thus revealing his shortcomings in theorising the role of power in subject-formation and the dangers of socio-institutional recognition. It will thus point us in the direction of a more appropriate, albeit a more complex and ambivalent, account of recognition.

An abiding feature of Butler's work is her attempt to sever gender categories from putative essences of femininity and masculinity by arguing that gender is not merely a cultural construct but rather a type of performance based on the adoption and display of certain signs and on the ritual repetition of stylised acts. Butler (1988, p. 519) begins outlining this project by arguing that gender is 'in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*'. Gender is created through a reiteration of acts that are internally discontinuous but collectively produce the '*appearance of substance*', and hence is no more than 'a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief' (Butler 1988, p. 520; cf. Butler 1990, p. 141).

Butler maintains that the acts which constitute gender are governed by institutionalised norms that enforce certain modes of behaviour, thought, speech, and even shape our bodies. The process of

becoming a gendered subject is a heavily regulated and normalised process that governs what counts as intelligible and viable forms of identity. As a result, all positive constructions of gender categories will be exclusionary and contestable; the very process of gender identification implicates one within a normalising matrix of signification that works to foreclose otherness through the regulation of behaviour (Butler 1990). Accordingly, 'gender is not exactly what one "is" nor is it precisely what one "has". Gender is the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place' (Butler 2004a, p. 42).

This raises an important point: if the very processes through which one becomes a gendered subject – and hence, a recognisable entity – are always and inescapably infused with power relations that exert a normalising and disciplinary pressure on individuals, then subject formation is co-extensive with power. Consequently, issues of power cannot be transcended or eradicated through getting the 'right' kinds of recognition in place (as adherents to the deficit model of recognition suggest). Rather, acts of recognition will themselves be part of the mechanisms of power through which the subject, as a recognisable entity, is produced and sustained (Butler 1997). Crucially, if recognition and power are intertwined in the production of subjects, then recognition is also part of the process by which certain forms of subjectivity are denied or undermined:

[I]f the schemes of recognition that are available to us are those that 'undo' the person by conferring recognition, or 'undo' the person by withholding recognition, then recognition becomes a site of power by which the human is differentially produced. This means that to the extent that desire is implicated in social norms, it is bound up with the question of power and with the problem of who qualifies as recognizably human and who does not.  
(Butler 2004a, p. 2)

The idea of being 'undone' by recognition reflects the fact that a number of people experience recognition as highly problematic process that involves negotiating with and through identities that they may find themselves unable to identify with and yet find imposed onto them. For example, a very masculine-looking male who feels like a woman may struggle to identify with and embody a

particular set of gender norms through which they can become recognisable to themselves and others. The constant demands of social life to be recognisably male or female can thus 'undo' their own sense of self, especially when the norms that structure gender recognition preclude ambiguous gender identifications and the exploration of transgender identities. In being recognised as male, and failing to be recognised as female, the individual may experience themselves being constantly 'undone' by interpersonal and institutional patterns of recognition that preclude them from constructing a viable identity for themselves. Alternatively, an intersexed individual confronted with a social world that is configured around the gender binary may find that the ways in which they are recognised work to 'undo' their sense of self by erasing the ambiguity of sexual and gendered identity, thus potentially rendering their lives unintelligible, incoherent and unacceptable (cf. Karkazis 2008; Preves 2003). Medical efforts to 'correct' this 'defect' (i.e. the intersexed body) are attempts at imposing a scheme of recognition onto intersexed individuals by identifying them as 'really' male or female.

Whilst normative recognition theorists such as Honneth and Taylor acknowledge that the possible ways in which someone can be recognised are governed by dominant norms, neither of them goes far enough in analysing this issue. Honneth suggests that problems with recognition will be ironed out as people have their claims for recognition mutually reciprocated. On this model, power becomes extrinsic to the recognition relation – it can be corrected through altering the relations of recognition. However, Butler's analysis rejects this picture. Recognition is treated as co-extensive with power and hence any act of recognition can simultaneously exert negative (e.g. normalising / exclusionary) as well as positive (e.g. self-affirming) pressure. The result is a more ambivalent account of recognition than Honneth and Taylor offer, which is better attuned to the negative effects inherent within acts of recognition.

One implication of Butler's account is that one may well find that one does not want to be recognised, if all available forms of recognition work to undo one's sense of self or force one into an identity that one cannot live with. 'There are advantages to remaining less than intelligible,' Butler (2004, p. 3) writes, 'if intelligible is understood as that which is produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing norms'. Hence, it might be necessary to risk becoming in some sense unrecognisable – at least for a temporary period – if recognition works to produce us in ways

that we find ourselves unable to live with (Butler 2004b). Furthermore, this desire *not* to be recognised can itself be taken as a political strategy aimed at challenging entrenched norms of identity – not just with the aim of producing alternative forms of recognition but, more fundamentally, to call into question the very notion of a recognisable identity and hence to highlight and explore the limits and limitations of recognition itself.

Importantly, this does not mean that we should reject recognition entirely and thus strive to live a life that is fundamentally unrecognisable. Recognition is fundamental to making sense of ourselves, our actions and our place in the world, and thus we need to construct a plausible, positive account of recognition (albeit one that is attentive to the subtle ways in which recognition is intertwined with normalisation of identities at a socio-institutional level). If Butler were suggesting that we ought not to want to be recognised, then her account would be highly problematic. However, Butler (1987; 2004a; 2005) repeatedly emphasises the importance of recognition for understanding ourselves and the social world, and thus she should not be read as recommending that we move beyond or that we ought not to want recognition.

Rather than reject recognition, Butler highlights (i) the ways in which recognition is connected with regulatory practices and discourses; and (ii) the problems that arise when one finds oneself unable to identify and embody gendered norms. For example, individuals who deviate from established norms of sex and gender may find no proper patterns and practices of recognition available to them through which they can adequately make sense of themselves. Recognition will then be experienced as a coercive imposition that undermines their own attempts at self-understanding. In such a situation, Butler (2004a, p. 4) observes, ‘I may feel that without some recognizability I cannot live. But I may also feel that the norms by which I am recognized make life unlivable’. This is not to deny the importance of recognition, but instead to highlight those occasions when we find recognition to be as much part of the problem as part of the solution. Rather than being simply ‘for’ or ‘against’ recognition, Butler stresses its value whilst simultaneously exploring its dangers.

Because an appreciation for these negative dynamics of recognition are generally absent from Honneth’s theory, he overlooks subtle but significant ways in which recognition is intertwined with the production and regulation of subjects. As noted, this stems from his overemphasis on the

phenomenology of recognition and his underlying perfectionist model. The result is that he offers an oversimplified and misleading account of the relationship between power and recognition. Along these lines, McNay (2008) has persuasively argued that Honneth, and contemporary recognition theorists more generally, tend to treat power as extrinsic to recognition and identity-formation. According to McNay (2008, p. 162), Honneth's idea of a 'primordial desire for recognition' means that he invokes a 'pre-political realm of social suffering is seen as a realm of unmediated experience characterized by spontaneous and authentic feelings with inherent moral status' (McNay 2008, p. 138). One consequence of this is that power is removed from the level of agency and identity-formation. Honneth's account thus forecloses the possibility that

the desire for recognition might be far from a spontaneous and innate phenomenon but the effect of a certain ideological manipulation of individuals. A critical perspective is foregone by thinkers who naturalize the idea of recognition by failing to examine more thoroughly the way in which emotions and other aspects of embodied subjectivity are mediated through social relations of power. (McNay 2008, pp. 10-11).

McNay develops Bourdieu's account of *Habitus* in order to generate her critical perspective. Although her critique is compelling, I think that there is also value in turning to Butler's and Foucault's analyses of the subjectivity-power-discourse triad in order to theorise our pervasive desire for recognition and authentic self-realisation. In particular, whilst McNay attends to accounts of embodied agency and recognition theories' capacities to adequately characterise and alter gender relations, a Butlerian-Foucauldian critique unveils the ways that certain identities are produced and regulated as viable, and the connections between these identities and technologies of truth and domination. Rather than understand our desire for recognition ontologically as part of our fundamental human nature, this perspective would situate our demands for recognition in relation to a series of historical and contemporary social practices and institutions that collectively generate particular forms of subjectivity.

Within this account our desire and struggle for recognition would mirror the techniques of power established in the confessional, in which individuals seek legitimation from authority through acts of self-disclosure (Foucault 1978). The strength of our desire for recognition is thus indicative of the way we have internalised a set of discourses and practices centred on the production of the individualised self as an object of investigation and control. From this perspective, an adequate analysis of recognition and power must attend to the ways in which recognition is tied up with the production and regulation of certain modes of thought and particular forms of identity. This is not to suggest that we should either resist developing a theory of recognition or deny its importance for making sense of ourselves and one another. What it does mean is that we need an account that is more sensitive to a range of socio-institutional issues connected to power and the regulation of identity than Honneth, and the deficit model more generally, offers. Butler's work is extremely useful in constructing such an account, although I shall suggest some ways in which it can be improved in the final section of this paper. First, the following section expands on the above claims through highlighting the regulatory and disciplinary effects of gender recognition.

### **The Recognition and Regulation of Gender Identity**

As the above discussion makes clear, Butler identifies recognition as co-extensive with power, and hence relations of recognition are also seen as relations of normalisation and exclusion. This clearly differs from Honneth's position, who explicitly states that it is wrong 'to conceptualise societies as relations of domination' (Honneth 1991, p. 303). Of course, it would be mistaken to say that Honneth ignores the issue of power. He is fully aware that power can shape strategies of recognition and thus his analysis of misrecognition is aimed precisely at socially sanctioned forms of humiliation, disrespect and social exclusion. However, because he binds recognition to neo-Aristotelian self-realisation, his analysis of power is restricted to its effects on an individual's successful psychological development (that is, issues of personal injury arising from misrecognition). This leaves his account blind to, or at least silent about, the way that power is infused into discursive and institutional practices of subject-formation. Thus, a more appropriate theory of recognition must fully address the

ways in which recognition determines the kinds of subjects we can become, that is, the regulatory and disciplining dimensions of recognition.

To illustrate this claim, it is instructive to consider the struggles with and against recognition experienced by trans individuals,<sup>4</sup> especially in their relationship to what are recognised as ‘normal’, intelligible and coherent gender identities. In falling outside the limits of the ‘normal’, wherein the normal is construed as natural and hence ‘right’, many transgender identities must struggle against assumptions about what constitutes a recognisable gender identity. When one’s identity lies outside of the realm of possible and acceptable identities prescribed by society’s dominant norms, institutions and discourses, then one is embroiled in complex struggles both for and against recognition wherein it is not clear what ‘success’ in such struggles might mean. Transgender identities thus present a problem of recognition stemming from difficulties built into our shared conceptual repertoire, which make it difficult to recognise transgender people even when they seek recognition. Importantly, the idea that someone could seek recognition but find themselves unable to receive an appropriate form of recognition undermines the universality of the deficit model of recognition.

Green (2006) broaches these issues in his discussion of the social exclusion of transsexual men and the ‘visibility dilemma’ that they face. Writing of the medical and psychological treatment that transsexuals receive, Green (2006, p. 502) writes that ‘is supposed to make us feel normal. We are not supposed to want attention as transsexuals; we are supposed to want to fit in as “normal” men’. However, he highlights a key issue through recounting his personal experiences: ‘I always felt like something “other”. Can I just be a man now, or must I always be “other”?’ (Green 2006, p. 503). Green raises the possibility that the very act of embarking on a process of gender-modification that challenges the norms underpinning gender recognition may prevent one from obtaining affirmative social recognition of one’s gendered self.

Green’s question, to which we may find ourselves unable to offer an immediate or satisfying response, draws attention to the ambivalence and limits of recognition. One is taught to want recognition – for example, to seek gender reassignment precisely to obtain recognition of one’s new

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<sup>4</sup> I use the term ‘trans’ as an umbrella term for a set of sexual and gendered identities which, in their respective ways, fail to conform to the current gender system’s binary logic of belonging unambiguously to the naturalised categories of man and woman (cf. Stryker 1998).

identity – but one may well find no easy way of being recognised and hence risk the danger of being permanently ‘other’ (and thus, in a sense, unrecognisable). It is entirely possible that no amount of positive recognition is going to rectify this situation. To quote Green (2006, p. 503; emphasis added), ‘Seeking acceptance within the system of “normal” and denying our transsexual status is an acquiescence to the prevailing binary gender paradigm that will *never* let us fit in, and will *never* accept us as equal members of society. Our transsexual status will *always* be used to threaten and shame us’. The ways in which gender is institutionally and socially secured as naturalised, heterosexual and binary means that gender identities which challenge this model will face complex struggles with and against recognition with no clear direction or solution.

On a similar theme, Davy (2011, p. 13) notes that the concept of a ‘transsexual’ as a recognizable term ‘can both illuminate and undermine the lives of Transsexuals’. One reason for this is that, in being recognised as a transsexual, one can be established as an agentic subject realising one’s ends (namely, to change one’s sex) and *simultaneously* be normalised into a particular type of gendered existence through the very process of being recognised. This further emphasises the ambivalence within the dynamics of recognition: it both enhances and constrains individuals in their attempts to construct an identity they can identify with. Importantly, this ambivalence cannot be resolved through instantiating ‘better’ or expanded forms of recognition, as the deficit model would recommend. Rather, it demonstrates that there will be times when we might have to reconcile ourselves to the limits and permanent dangers effects of recognition.

The institutional recognition of gender is emblematic of these dynamics, often working to regulate the possible forms which gender identity may take whilst also allowing individuals to realise their desire for self-transformation. For example, Epstein and Straub (1991, p. 3) argue that ‘physiology, anatomy, and body codes (clothing, cosmetics, behaviours, miens, affective and sexual object choices) are taken over by institutions that use bodily difference to define and to coerce gender identity’. Similarly, Cromwell (1999, p. 125) notes how gender identities ‘framed within a medicalized border effectively negated individual identity and erased those whose histories, identities, and sexualities did not fit within the criterial boundaries of a “true transsexual”’. The medical and legal diagnosis and treatment of transsexuality is thus an example of the ways that identity is

normalised and regulated through recognition. In having to prove to medical practitioners that they are 'authentic' transsexuals, individuals can find themselves pressured to conform to particular notions of masculinity or femininity. An inability to embody these gender norms properly can lead to treatment being withheld, which in turn can make it much harder for transsexuals to negotiate gendered social spaces and social interactions. Ultimately, the failure to meet the demands of recognisable gender identities can leave the trans individual as particularly vulnerable to verbal abuse, physical violence and social ostracism, as well as rendering that individual potentially unrecognisable to themselves and others.

Underlying these issues is the fact that the way in which dominant gender identities are secured involves certain other gender identities being posited within a realm of the sick, deviant, monstrous or unintelligible – a realm that functions to strengthen and entrench these dominant gender identities (Connolly 2002). For example, the commitment to a dualistic framework of gender not only defines intersexed individuals as deviant, but the fact that they are often 'corrected' in infancy through surgical intervention (that is, through being recognised as their a 'true' or 'real' sex) reveals that 'intersex' is precluded from being a viable subject position and this foreclosure serves to reinforce the normative weight of a binary gender system (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Butler 2001). Through securing the stability of a binary gender system, intersex identities are actively erased and hence rendered as incoherent and unviable. Consequently, recognition struggles experienced by intersex individuals cannot be reduced to simply a case of having one's identity valued (i.e. the extension or modification of recognition relations) or achieving psychic flourishing. More fundamentally it is about having one's identity acknowledged as an ontological possibility – and evidently the situation has been, or is, similar for homosexual, transsexual, transgendered and asexual identities). There are times when the norms through which gender identities are established preclude an individual from being able to seek recognition, at which point strategies aimed at undoing or undermining recognition can become preferable political alternatives. This requires attending more to the socio-institutional dynamics of recognition as a regulatory social practice, and less to recognition as a psychological process of self-making aimed at individual self-realisation.

## Honneth on Power and/as Ideology

In a recent essay entitled 'Recognition as Ideology' (Honneth 2012),<sup>5</sup> Honneth responds to the claim that recognition is a vehicle for power. Specifically, he considers Althusser's argument that recognition functions as ideology. According to Honneth (2012, p. 75), recognition functions as an ideology when, '[p]raising certain characteristics or abilities seems to have become a political instrument whose unspoken function consists in inserting individuals or social groups into existing structures of domination by encouraging a positive self-image. Far from making a lasting contribution to the autonomy of the members of our society, social recognition appears merely to serve the creation of attitudes that conform to the dominant system'. Consequently, rather than empowering or liberating individuals, practices of recognition 'subject them to domination' (Honneth 2012, p. 75). Honneth's response in thinking through this issue demonstrates the limitations of both his perfectionist account and the deficit model of recognition.

Honneth begins by pointing out that recognition theory cannot be accused of ignoring issues of social subjection and domination. The theory of recognition, he observes, 'owes its entire critical impulse to social phenomena of lacking or insufficient recognition. It seeks to draw attention to practices of humiliation or degradation that deprive social subjects of a decisive condition for the formation of their autonomy' (Honneth 2012, p. 76). Not only does this emphasise the deficit model approach – that is, social issues conceived in terms of a *lack* of recognition – but it also reduces the problem of recognition to negative experiences that undermine autonomy and self-realisation. However, the preceding reflections on gender recognition suggest that the problem of recognition cannot be reduced to a perfectionist account centred on the conditions for self-flourishing. Rather, the more intractable problem is the ways in which recognition functions to regulate the realm of viable identities at an ontological level, and the consequence normalisation and regulation of behaviour obtained through the production of viable and unviable identities.

Rather than focus on specific experiences of recognition, we need to assess how practices of recognition shape the very forms that subjectivity may take. Whilst Honneth addresses how ideology

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<sup>5</sup> This essay first appeared as Honneth (2007b).

distorts or alters the way we positively or negatively think about ourselves, the theories of Foucault and Butler raise concerns about recognition's capacity to normalise and regulate our modes of thought and behaviour by governing the vary forms we may take as recognisable social beings. Honneth's preclusion of this issue is evident in his assertion that 'when we speak of acts of recognition, we always refer to the public display of a value or achievement that is to be attributed to a person or social group' (Honneth 2012, p. 78). Consequently, Honneth (2012, p. 81) concludes that recognition 'should be understood as a genus comprising various forms of practical attitudes whose primary intention consists in a particular act of affirming another person or group'.

The major site for recognition, then, is the individual's experience of the ways that they are recognised and the impact that this has on their capacities for autonomy. Ideology can be effective when recognition makes us feel good about ourselves through giving positive expression to certain traits, abilities or characteristics. What is missing in Honneth's analysis is consideration of the ways in which recognition intertwines with discursive and institutional practices that generate our need for recognition in the first place. Ideology, as he conceives it, is effective because he assumes an inherent need for recognition, which allows the coercive pressures of ideology get a grip on us by affirming certain traits in order to reconcile ourselves to a particular form of thought or behaviour. However, the deeper problem for Foucault is the fact that we are produced as recognition-sensitive beings in the first place, and the fact that this process of subject-production is imbricated with individualising and normalising practices of subjectivity.<sup>6</sup>

Somewhat surprisingly, Honneth has recently emphasised the problems of a contemporary subjectivity focused upon individual self-realisation, especially the ways in which the search for authentic identity is co-opted by social powers in order to legitimise and strengthen the current socio-economic system. Rather than furthering the individual's capacity to develop a unique and positive relation-to-self, the concept of self-realisation is subtly organised by social institutions and discourses in order to shape particular forms of behaviour and modes of thought. Consequently, 'Compelled from all sides to remain open to the psychological impulses of authentic identity-seeking, subjects are

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<sup>6</sup> For a critique of Honneth's discussion of ideology that also draws from Foucault, see Owen (2010). However, whilst Owen suggests that Foucault's work can strengthen Honneth's account, I think that their positions are more incompatible. Owen and I also appear to differ on our reading of Foucault's account of the self.

faced with the alternative of feigning authenticity or fleeing into depression; they are forced to choose between staging originality for strategic reasons and pathologically shutting down' (Honneth 2012, p. 166).

Honneth's pessimistic diagnosis appears to undermine his own comments on the normative direction of social development as consisting in the expansion of authentic recognition relations, for his analysis raises the issue of whether the acquisition of *more* recognition and the subsequent increase in opportunities for individual self-realisation represent the answers to the problem of contemporary subjectivity. Furthermore, his focus on the psychological effects of this regulation of self-realisation overlooks the ways that institutional practices of recognition construct and normalise the forms of identity which we seek to take on as part of this search for authentic individualism. To repeat the point above, this underlying perfectionism and the importance he places on subjective experiences of recognition means that he does not adequately theorise how recognition is intertwined with the social regulation of subjects and the framing of viable and unviable forms of identity.

### **Back to Foucault: Recognition as a Social Practice**

I have argued that Butler's discussion of gender performativity and recognition reveals deficiencies in Honneth's work and the deficit model more generally. Thus, her work points us toward a more appropriate, albeit a more complex and ambivalent, account of recognition. Despite the overall promise of her work, it is worthwhile highlighting some concerns with Butler's position in considering how best to conceptualise recognition. In particular, I claim that Butler's model of recognition is, at times, overly-individualised and places too much emphasis on the linguistic and psychic dimensions of recognition. I suggest that emphasising the Foucauldian aspects of Butler's work, which are evident in the account of performativity and recognition outlined above, would help correct this issue and thus enable us to develop a more plausible account of recognition and its ambivalent effects.

My reason for challenging part of Butler's account of recognition is the emphasis she sometimes places on our internal desire for recognition and the psychic internalisation of power in

discussing subject-formation (Butler 1987; 1997). According to Butler, our struggles for recognition are driven by the psyche's desire for self-identity, which renders individuals vulnerable to melancholic attachments in the necessarily unsuccessful quest for such self-identity. The problem with this Freudian and Lacanian dimension to her work is two-fold: (i) it over-emphasises the role of the individual's internal psychological make-up in subject-formation, thus diverting attention away from structural and institutional pressures underpinning recognition struggles; and (ii) it understands subject-formation as being primarily linguistic.

This latter point is clear in her use of Althusser's discussion of interpellation to explain the processes by which we are made into subjects (Butler 1997). According to Althusser, we come to recognise ourselves as subjects through the 'hail' of another. In recognising oneself in the hail, one submits to the authority of the law as a subject before the law. That is, one is aware of being 'called' into being as a subject before and under an authority. Althusser claims that any form of recognition is ideological insofar as it induces one to accept a self-conception that conforms to the expected norms and values of a given society. Hence, interpellation situates us as subjects who have submitted ourselves to a system of rules and beliefs. The important point is that it is the linguistic event that is the hail produces us as subjects. As Butler (1997, p. 76) writes, 'the subject is the linguistic occasion for the individual to achieve and reproduce intelligibility, the linguistic condition of its existence and agency'. Similarly, she states that 'Called by an injurious name, I come into social being' (Butler 1997, p. 104).

By combining interpellation with a theory of subject-formation driven by the psyche's desire for self-identity, Butler can be read as producing an account of the individual that is abstracted from structural and material determinants (cf. McNay 2000). According to Boucher, the result of this is a methodological individualism that fails to acknowledge the institutional formation of subjectivity: 'her theory remains confined to the perspective of the isolated individual either resisting their subjectification or confronting their oppressor' (Boucher 2006, p. 114). The importance of this point derives from the fact that Butler is often aligned with Foucault and Althusser when it comes to her account of subjectivity and recognition. Indeed, Butler herself uses Althusser and Foucault alongside Lacan and Nietzsche in account of power and subject-formation. Whilst there are certainly important

similarities in their respective positions, it nevertheless misrepresents Foucault's work and hence misrecognises important connections between power, recognition and subject-formation.

Foucault focused not on the linguistic, interpellative construction of the individual, but rather on social practices and techniques of subject-formation. As Olssen (1999, p. 31) observes, 'For Foucault, the subject is not constituted by language, as Lacan [and Butler's reading of Althusser] would have it, but through many different types of practice'. Foucault (1997, p. 277) is quite clear on this, stating that 'it is not enough to say that the subject is constituted in a symbolic system. It is not just in the play of symbols that the subject is constituted. It is constituted in real practices'. In order to grasp this difference, consider Foucault's discussion of the confession in volume one of *A History of Sexuality* (1978). The significance of the confession is neither that the individual must 'speak him/herself', i.e. they must act as the linguistic occasion for self-constitution, nor that they recognise themselves in the way they are 'hailed' by the priest. Rather, the significance of confession is that it is an institutional practice, situated within a matrix of other institutional practices, which constructs a particular relation-to-self, that is, it determines how we understand ourselves and our relation to authority. This, in turn, creates the conditions for a recognition relation in which we seek 'authorisation' of ourselves from social institutions, thus instantiating a subordinate and normalising dimension to recognition. Similarly, in *Discipline and Punish* (1995) Foucault examines how institutional and structural practices shape forms of thought, behaviour, identities and self-understanding.

Foucault's attention to concrete institutional practices counterbalances the intrapsychic and interpersonal dynamics of desire and conflict that Butler sees as constituting the individual. By placing the subject within a nexus of systematic institutional, material and discursive processes, we can highlight more clearly the role of power in subject-formation and appreciate the importance of institutional recognition in shaping the horizon through which specific identities are rendered viable and intelligible. Foucault (1997, p. 223) describes the processes that condition the formation of the intelligible subject as 'technologies of the self'. Thus, in his analyses of sexuality and pleasure, he seeks to identify the social techniques and practices through which we are able to recognise ourselves and one another as socially-intelligible beings. In so doing, Foucault's work brings to light the socio-

institutional dimension of recognition, thus providing a useful corrective to Honneth's over-attention to psychological experiences of recognition. This enables us to better account for the ways that recognition works to establish and limit the realm of available identities, roles and self-relations through which we may make sense of ourselves.

Of course, this reading of Foucault is consistent with those elements of Butler's writing, described in section three above, that do foreground the institutional dimension of recognition in subject-formation. Consequently, it would be propitious to develop these aspects of Butler's work whilst challenging the parts of her writing where she offers a more intrapsychic, linguistic model of subjectivity. This will allow us to construct an effective framework for developing a more complex, multi-faceted account of recognition – one more sensitive to issues of power and normalisation – than one finds amongst adherents of the deficit model. Importantly, in highlighting the importance of attending to socio-institutional patterns of recognition, I am not discarding the value of our interpersonal relations of recognition. Rather, the point is to warn against a reductive theory of recognition that is overly focused on psychological experiences of recognition and thus remains disconnected from, and overlooks or misrepresents, the ways that institutional practices shape our social relations of recognition and intertwine with power at a socio-institutional and discursive level. Rather than reducing recognition to an inersubjectively-conducted psychological quest for love, respect and esteem, we should attend to the concrete social-institutional practices and the effects, both positive and negative, that such practices have on our ability to make sense of ourselves, relate to one another and exist within wider society.<sup>7</sup> Developing the Foucauldian aspects of Butler's work will help us to identify and to respond to the imbrication of recognition with power and the regulation of identity, ultimately allowing us to get a better grasp of the complex and ambivalent effects of recognition.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>7</sup> I am very grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for suggesting this point.

I have argued that Honneth's reliance on perfectionist account of recognition as individual self-realisation means that he is unable to adequately theorise the ways in which recognition regulates and normalises gender identities. This inability to identify important connections between recognition and power is evident in his recent discussion of recognition and ideology, which repeats the problems evident in his earlier works. Against Honneth's model of recognition, I have suggested that Butler's theory of gender performativity is a more promising way to think through the issues of recognition, identity and power. However, Butler is at times guilty of over-emphasising the linguistic dimension of subject-formation and thus I have recommended bringing to the fore the more Foucauldian elements of her account, in which recognition is treated as a set of social and institutional practices. This moves away from Honneth's focus on the psychic effects of recognition, and toward an understanding of recognition as embedded within contemporary techniques of power and subjectivity.

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