



# The Role of Recognition for Relational Theories of Autonomy

LISA BIN

RESEARCH

**HUP** HELSINKI  
UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

## ABSTRACT

The article discusses the relationship between autonomy and recognition; it argues that recognition is a fundamental component in the development of autonomy-related competencies. Specifically, if autonomy is considered through the lens of relational accounts, recognition indeed affects self-authorization, or the ability that agents have to portray themselves as autonomous agents. Then, I define the concept of recognition by referring to Axel Honneth and Paul Ricoeur's accounts of recognition. While Honneth's conception falls into an essentialistic paradigm, Ricoeur's one portrays recognition as a gift. In addition, I argue that Ricoeur's theory of recognition allows a shift in the symbolic order of society through the concept of utopia. This shift helps in preventing marginalizing practices that are undermining the autonomy of minorities or economically disadvantaged subjects in a society.

## CORRESPONDING

### AUTHOR:

**Lisa Bin**

Helmut Schmidt  
Universität, DE

[lisabin96@gmail.com](mailto:lisabin96@gmail.com)

---

## KEYWORDS:

Autonomy; Relational  
Autonomy; Recognition;  
Honneth; Ricoeur

## TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Bin, Lisa. 2022. "The Role of  
Recognition for Relational  
Theories of Autonomy."  
*Redescriptions: Political  
Thought, Conceptual History  
and Feminist Theory* 25(2):  
137–153. DOI: [https://doi.  
org/10.33134/rds.372](https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.372)

The purpose of this article is to underscore the role of recognition in the development of autonomy. The subject of recognition has been explored from several perspectives in contemporary literature since the 1990s, when Charles Taylor released *The Politics of Recognition* (Taylor 1992), and 1996, when Honneth published *The Struggle for Recognition* (Honneth 1996). These contributions range from Ricoeur to Butler, Deranty or Renault (Rancière & Honneth 2016). Specifically, this work highlights the importance of an account of recognition for the relational structure of autonomy.

Thus, I begin by introducing the idea of relational autonomy. Relational approaches focus on the role social contexts have in the development of autonomy and stress the inability of content-neutral approaches to describe the autonomous agent. I go on to define a specific aspect of relational autonomy: self-authorization, which calls for agents to believe they are legitimate bearers of claims, able to engage in their community, and believe that their needs, values or opinions are in fact worthy. Self-authorization is more than a personality trait; it is a crucial feature of the autonomous agent: if agents lack self-authorization because of exclusionary practices (e.g. gender-based socialization or racist policies), or because their claims are consistently undermined, even institutionally (e.g. the right to own a house, or at least be able to enjoy one, is denied to people who do not adhere to certain economic criteria, as homeless people), then those agents might not be able to portray themselves as autonomous agents. Not because they are *per se* unable to be autonomous, but as a result of social and institutionalized practices. Or, it's possible that the propagandistic rhetoric shared on social media about certain minorities, has a negative effect on how such minorities perceive themselves. An example is represented by Matt Walsh's documentary *What is a Woman?* which promotes a transphobic narrative on issues like gender reassignment and gender dysphoria and has been openly promoted on YouTube and other platforms, thanks to the right-winged owned media company the Daily Wire.

Then, I refer to Axel Honneth's definition of Recognition as it was developed in *The Struggle for Recognition* and I underline its most important feature (Honneth 1996). To do so, I also focus on the three types of recognition he identifies: love, respect and social esteem. However, I underscore how Honneth's theory not only reifies the concept. It also does not analyze the relationship between minorities and exclusionary ideology.

A more radical interpretation of recognition that gives people the ability to change a society's symbolic structure is made possible by the introduction of Ricoeur's theory and the concepts of gift, ideology and utopia (Ricoeur 1986; Ricoeur 2005). Recognition alters how we view the other in its uniqueness and its inclusion. For instance, it acknowledges the agency of previously mis-recognized groups, such as homeless people, and demands for policies and institutions that are able to reflect those practices of recognition. In addition, since it does not subject those agents to the same ideology that was excluding them, I contend that this is especially important when it comes to the acknowledgement of minorities.

The consequences of recognition for relational autonomy are then discussed in the conclusions, and I make the case that in order to fulfill the commitments of a relational approach, it is necessary to question the symbolic order or structure of contemporary western liberal societies. In order to achieve this, it is essential to

look into the causes of mis-recognition as well as to discover new *utopias* that can in fact reflect the recognition of the other and, consequently, foster their relational autonomy.

## RELATIONAL AUTONOMY

Relational autonomy recognizes the importance of social contexts in the development of autonomy by emphasizing the fact that agents are dependent on such contexts (Mackenzie & Stoljar 2000; Nedelsky 1989). Accordingly, the network of relationships in which an agent is embedded impacts the agent's ability to build autonomy-related competences. Therefore, 'the focus of relational approaches is to analyze the implication of the intersubjective and social dimensions of selfhood and identity for conceptions of individual autonomy and moral and political agency' (Mackenzie & Stoljar 2000). As a result, they rejected individualistic and overly rationalistic views of autonomy.

Relational theorists have focused on a variety of topics, ranging from gender and autonomy to autonomy and care. This paragraph defines relational autonomy using Catriona Mackenzie's *Three Dimensions of Autonomy: A Relational Analysis* (Mackenzie 2014). Mackenzie proposes that autonomy is composed of three distinct but interconnected axes: self-determination, self-governance and self-authorization. The following chapter, in particular, focuses on the role of recognition in the third axis of this taxonomy: self-authorization. However, the value of recognition is not limited to this axis. In fact, while the primary focus of this research is on the relationship between self-authorization and recognition, it would be reductive to dismiss the relationship between recognition and agents' ability to live a self-determined existence or their self-governing abilities. For instance, not recognizing a minority, a group or a culture can lead to practices of exclusion and can, consequently, undermine agents' ability to live a self-determining life. See, for instance, the privileges that a citizenship in Italy guarantees – even just participating in the elections – and the difficulties migrants have to go through to obtain it.

To clarify, self-determination

involves having the freedom and opportunities to make and enact choices of practical import to one's life, that is, choices about what to value, who to be, and what to do. The self-determination axis identifies external, structural conditions for individual autonomy, specifically freedom conditions and opportunity conditions. (Mackenzie 2014, 17)

Then, self-governance involves the skills and capacity to reflect and engage in critical discourses or enact decisions that express one's commitments. It is worth mentioning that, to exclude from these categories those commitments that come from manipulative contexts John Christman has introduced the concept of alienation (Christman 2009). In addition, to avoid an over-rationalistic conception of autonomy, authors such as Diana Meyers have included in such a range of abilities like empathy, compassion or imagination (Meyers 1989).

Self-authorization entails believing that one has the normative authority to be self-determining and self-governing. In other words, it indicates that one considers oneself to be authorized to exercise practical control over one's life and to decide one's own reasons for doing so. Therefore, autonomy as self-authorization can be described as

‘a constitutively social capacity, in the sense that it is constituted within normative social practices of mutual recognition’ (Mackenzie 2014, 18). As a result, actors must be able to determine their own values and identity-shaping practical commitments. This axis includes conditions such as accountability, self-evaluative attitudes and social recognition, relevant to the topic (Mackenzie 2014).

## SELF-AUTHORIZATION AND THE ROLE OF RECOGNITION

Simply put, self-authorization enables agents to make decisions and have a positive relationship with themselves. As Paul Benson pointed out, self-authorization indicates an attitude of accountability that demonstrates they deliberately embraced their commitments (Benson 1994). Accordingly, self-authorization is a pre-requisite for autonomy, at least from agents’ points of view. Thus, agents should possess self-respect, self-esteem and self-trust (Anderson & Honneth 2005). Self-respect represents having a conception of oneself that allows agents to see themselves as the bearer of legit claims. Accordingly, agents whose self-esteem has been diminished (i.e. by practices of denial) are less likely to portrait themselves as bearers of legit claims. Then

whereas self-respect has to do with one’s capacities for processing various considerations in deliberating what to do, self-trust [or self-confidence] has to do with the affectively mediated perceptual capacities by which what is subjectively felt becomes material in the first place. (Anderson & Honneth 2005, 133)

Possessing self-esteem means having positive semantic tools to describe oneself. These three self-evaluative attitude play a crucial role in Honneth’s conception of recognition since

the very possibility of a positive identity-formation depends on the development of self-confidence [or self-trust], self-respect, and self-esteem. These three practical self-relations can be developed fully only through different patterns of mutual recognition, namely love, respect, and solidarity [as the next chapter shows]. (Moyaert 2011)

This observation recalls the main topic of this article or the role of social recognition in the development of autonomy-related competencies (Benson 2005). For instance, both Benson (2005) and Honneth and Margalit (2001) consider *The Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison and the main character’s inability to see himself as socially worthy and to be autonomous because of practices of exclusion. The effects of denial pertain to the public sphere (i.e. in the sphere of legal or political recognition), as well as to the private sphere – like friendship, relationships or familial love. This point is going to be specifically highlighted in the next two sections.

In his article *Autonomy and Vulnerability Entwined* (Anderson 2013) Joel Anderson further specifies the characteristics of relational autonomy by introducing the concepts of recognition and vulnerability. The role of vulnerability in relational accounts is crucial since, as Honneth and Anderson noticed (Anderson & Honneth 2005), if relational accounts of autonomy stress the role of relationships in the development of autonomy, then it is necessary to consider the fact that ‘autonomy is

vulnerable to disruption in one's relationship to another' (Anderson & Honneth 2005, 130). Accordingly vulnerability can be defined as follows:

A person is vulnerable to the extent to which she is not in a position to prevent occurrences that would undermine what it takes to be important to her. Vulnerability [...] is a matter of effective control, understood as a function of the relative balance between the person in question and the forces that can influence her. (Anderson 2013, 135)

To better understand autonomy and its relation to vulnerability, Anderson's work introduces the concepts of *recognitionally secured agency* and *participation-affording competence ascription*. Here, I am not able to deepen and analyze these two concepts, and I focus on those traits that are relevant for my analysis. On the one hand, recognitionally secured agency concerns 'my being able to view myself positively by being recognized in interaction with others' (Anderson 2013, 138). Agents are vulnerable if they do not possess a positive attitude towards themselves since they can not see themselves as able to carry out autonomous life plans, or to recognize them as worthwhile. Or,

Only those who see themselves as having been taken cognizance of positively in the mirror of the expressive behavioral modes of their counterparts know themselves to be socially recognized in an elementary form. (Honneth & Margalit 2001, 120)

Conversely, the concept of participation-affording competence ascription highlights the need for agents to be considered autonomous in social practices; it stresses the role of mutual ascriptions of competencies for participation in communal activities. This relates to human vulnerability in the sense that

Some social practices (e.g. a conversation in German) require the mutual attribution of competence, and the conditional character of these attributions means that aspiring participants are vulnerable to being legitimately (or illegitimately) excluded from participation on grounds of insufficient competence. (Anderson 2013, 148)

Accordingly, autonomy and vulnerability are entwined since

Some social practices, cultures, and way of life involve a higher level of vulnerability, but that is part and parcel of what makes those practices particularly valuable, rewarding and autonomy enhancing. (Anderson 2013, 136)

In addition, Anderson suggests that recognition is more than just a 'good that we desire' (Anderson 2013, 141). It determines and secures positive relations to the self that determine personal autonomy. It allows agents to participate in a community and be recognized.

Before proceeding with the development of a theoretical framework for the concept of recognition, I highlight the fact that, as Anderson himself notices, defining autonomy through the concept of vulnerability does not mean denying that an excess of vulnerability can indeed impair autonomy. I mention here his insight on the topic since his conclusions to this issue is consistent with the theoretical framework of the conclusions. By anticipating something that the next paragraph aim to deepen, Anderson recognizes that that autonomy is 'itself the product of an ongoing historical

process and can vary with the social and historical contexts in which people find themselves' (Anderson 2013, 151–2). In fact, he stresses the necessity to 'integrate that analysis [a normative analysis of vulnerability] in the broader social-theoretic context in which autonomy emerges and operates' (Anderson 2013, 154–5).

After introducing the concept of recognition towards a relational approach, the following paragraph introduces Axel Honneth's theory of recognition.

## HONNETH'S CONCEPTION OF AUTONOMY

Honneth's most famous work on recognition is represented by his volume *The Struggle for Recognition*. Despite *The I in We* (Honneth 2012) being another more recent work dedicated to the topic of recognition I refer to *The Struggle* since it represents a more cohesive research on the topic.

'Overall, Honneth's "book" [The I in We] reads more like a collection of essays that are – more or less – loosely linked. It is not a book in which an author expresses a theme "– the-I-in-the-we," or "recognition –" [...]. It is not a comprehensive illumination of "the- I-in-the-we" or "recognition." Instead, some chapters avoid the term "recognition" altogether, while others read like book reviews'. (Kikauner 2015, 167)

In *The Struggle* Honneth presents a tripartite cognitive model that focuses on love, legal relations and solidarity. In the end, the chapter suggests what theoretical difficulties this model of recognition might encounter.

As Honneth states in the very first lines of his *The Struggle for Recognition* (Honneth 1996) 'in the present volume, I attempt to develop, on the basis of Hegel's model of a *struggle for recognition*, the foundations for a social theory with normative content' (Honneth 1996, 1). Indeed, Honneth's conception of self-realization through love, legal relationships and esteem is a normative conception in the sense that those forms represent a formal conception of ethical life. To pursue his goal, he mainly refers to the studies of the young Hegel. The reason for this choice is that

The young Hegel could develop this conception, [...] only because he was able to modify the model of 'social struggle' introduced in the social philosophies of Machiavelli and Hobbes in such a way that conflict among humans could be traced back, not to a motive of self-preservation, but to moral impulses. (Honneth 1996, 5)

This attitude towards the young Hegel has recently changed 'whereas in *The Struggle for Recognition* I had still assumed that only Hegel's Jena lectures contained coherent elements of a theory of recognition, after more intensive study of his mature writings I came to realize how wrong I had been' (Honneth 2012, VII). However, this methodological shift of perspective has not been integrated in a huger study on recognition.

Other major influences can be found in this book, as George Herbert-Mead's social-psychology and psychoanalysis in its object-relational form. Following these intuitions, Honneth builds a model of recognition based on concepts of love, legal relations and solidarity. Those three forms of recognition represent the preconditions for a positive relationship to self and, as pointed out, for autonomous actions.

The forms of recognition associated with love, rights, and solidarity provide the intersubjective protection that safeguards the conditions for external and internal freedom, upon which the process of articulating and realizing individual life-goals without coercion depends. Moreover, [...] they can be distilled, as structural elements, from the concrete totality of all particular forms of life. (Honneth 1996, 174)

In addition, Honneth's conception stresses that the self is embedded in a net of social relations that constitute it. This, not only shifts the perspective from individualistic conceptions of the self. It defines categories such as recognition, or autonomy, in what could be defined a *relational way*, by acknowledging that 'the only way, in which individuals are constituted as persons is by learning to refer to themselves, from the perspective of an approving or encouraging other, as beings with certain positive traits and abilities' (Honneth 1996, 173).

Honneth identifies love as being emotionally involved in another agent that is perceived in its unique being. It contributes to the development of personal identity – and autonomy – and is a fundamental component in a person's psychological constitution.

The second figure of recognition, characterized by the feeling of respect, is constituted by legal relations. Specifically, respect transcends the affective dimension that is peculiar to love. It is a universal claim to understand each person as autonomous and equal to every other.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, by taking the perspective of the other, we find ourselves as part of a community, acknowledging the role of the other. In fact

we can only come to understand ourselves as the bearers of rights when we know, in turn, what various normative obligations we must keep vis-a-vis others: only once we have taken the perspective of the *generalized other*, which teaches us to recognize the other members of the community as the bearers of rights, can we also understand ourselves to be legal persons, in the sense that we can be sure that certain of our claims will be met. (Honneth 1996, 108)

From this specific form of recognition the individual gains self-respect. As Moyaert puts it 'respect concerns the recognition of the individual as a subject of rights, regardless of his/her/[their] particular attributes' (Moyaert 2011, 88).

Social esteem is the third sphere of recognition and involves all those cases of recognitions that exceed the mutual attribution of legal rights between subjects. This allows agents to feel like members of a community that does not exclusively share a legal system. That is to say,

in order to be able to acquire an undistorted relation-to-self, human subjects always need – over and above the experience of affectionate care and legal recognition – a form of social esteem that allows them to relate positively to their concrete traits and abilities. (Honneth 1996, 121)

---

<sup>1</sup> Without deepening too much the topic, I would mention the problem of *legal equality*. As Moyaert (2011) noticed the problem of *recognizing as equal* in a multicultural society is indeed complexed. Consequently, she calls for the necessity to criticize the ideological framework of the concept of *legal equality*. Feminist legal philosophy have, among others, particularly criticized this topic. See, for instance, Mackinnon 1989, Mackinnon 1991, A. Scales 2006.

This form of recognition is specifically important for the next part since it deals with the symbolic order of a society.

To each of these forms of recognition Honneth associates a corresponding form of denial that hinders the possibility of self-realization. According to Ricoeur – this represents Honneth’s most important contribution on the topic. Indeed, it would be counter intuitive if the normative demands created by the speculative models would not give rise to some expectations that ask to be answered and whose disappointment would be proportionate to those demands (Ricoeur 2005).

Specifically, the forms of denial are: violence and abuse for love. For legal relationships, there are as many kinds of denial as there are of subjective rights leading people to lose their self-respect (Honneth 1996). To the third sphere of recognition, Honneth associates the concepts of humiliation or the fact that subjects are deprived of the possibility of seeing themselves as worthy. Interestingly, this does not only apply to individuals, but it also applies to large groups of people, such as minorities. This tripartition allows pointing to the spheres where agents might be vulnerable. It stresses how abusive families, or classist policies can influence individuals and their autonomy-related competencies.

From a relational point of view these conclusions emphasize how autonomy is not a property that an agent possesses. Autonomy is a capability; it is a matter of acquisition, maintenance and exercise rather than a permanent achievement. Thus, it requires practices of recognition that can secure autonomy-related competencies.

The fact that – as Honneth himself admitted – his theory of recognition requires a more specific and detailed definition of progress that is not found in his 1995 book introduces more contemporary works of Honneth on the theme of recognition. For instance, in his 2002 *Grounding Recognition: A Rejoinder to Critical Questions* (Honneth 2002) he defines progress as ‘every new evaluative quality whose confirmation through recognition increases a human subject’s capacity for autonomy must be viewed as a progressive step in the historical process of cultural transformation’ (Honneth 2002). Later, in his *The I in We* he also states the importance of a conception of progress. ‘In my opinion, we can only avoid this difficulty by equipping this moderate value realism with a robust concept of progress. [...]. This would involve assuming there to be a definite direction to the cultural transformations of valuable human qualities, which would allow us to make justified judgements about the trans-historical validity of a particular culture of recognition’ (Honneth 2012, 83). To further specify the topic, see *The Irreducibility of Progress* (Honneth 2007), or, more recently, *How to Envision Social Progress Today?* (Honneth 2018). However, there has not been a work where his most recent conception of recognition and progress encountered.

In more recent works, Honneth has also confronted the problem of essentialism. In his 2003 article, to avoid an essentialistic model that reduces love, rights and esteem to trans-historical entities, we find a different, historical, approach to the topic. The three spheres of recognition are indeed subject to historical and cultural changes. In other words, they are historically emerging achievements that have been institutionalized through historical developments. This solution is, if not similar, at least compatible with what the next chapter emphasizes. However, to avoid the problem of introducing the notion of *progress*, Ricoeur refers to the symbolic order of society and the possibility of subjects to interact and modify the symbolic order.



One other concern that was raised by Moyaert (Moyaert 2011) considering the problem of minorities. In fact 'recognition becomes dependent on the willingness of the other to reproduce the already existing value pattern of the society' (Moyaert 2011, 92). In addition, not only does this model of recognition reinforces dynamics of power between minorities and dominant elites, but it also equalizes recognition and identification. Here, the opportunity for minorities to challenge cultural homogeneity and to be recognized in more than a legal way and for recognition to overcome identification is at stake. This, however, can be done exclusively through the concept of *transforming reciprocity* and by introducing Ricoeurian categories to the discourse. Or,

What it takes is first of all a transformation of the symbolic order so that the relations of solidarity can be expanded in a more inclusive direction. The normative goal of the cultural struggle for recognition is a difference-friendly society that express its recognition of cultural minorities by allowing them to contribute to the shared framework of orientation. (Moyaert 2011, 93)

In recent works, *Recognition between Power and Normativity* (Honneth 2021), he indeed suggests that recognition should imply a shift of attitude towards the other person. However, the consideration is not further developed. Especially, he does not mention how recognition of the other would alter the already existing pattern of society on an institutional level. In other words, he does not clarify the recognition on the level of respect and legal relations. Does recognition, as a fundamental component of autonomy, involve a change in the legal paradigm or is it just a matter of enlarging the domain of people who can enjoy certain rights?

On top of that, his latter works do not suggest that a shift of the *already existing pattern of the society* is required, for instance, in terms of changing the institution themselves. Relational autonomy implies promoting policies and change in institutions that protect agents' self-authorization, for instance by fostering improvement in family laws, or economical issues. Indeed, analyzing recognition should imply seeking to determine whether the structure itself of contemporary liberal societies is compatible with an account of autonomy as self-authorization. However, 'critical theory is the critical theory of modern society, and in order to conduct its critical work, it only needs to rely on modern norms, norms that allegedly appear for the first time with modern society' (Deranty 2016, 78). Or, Honneth's theory is strictly related to the same institutions that perpetuate – and are grounded – on forms of mis-recognition.

In addition, Ricoeur has also pointed out the fact that recognition is not a good that can be accumulated. The market logic underlying Honneth's conception considers indeed recognition as a commercial good, as something that can be achieved and possessed.

In the end, Ludwig Siep (Siep 2011) noticed that Honneth's conception, considering its stance towards 'the relation between communicative structures of a society and its basic economical organization' (Siep 2011, 129) and the problem of shared values in a society and the 'group's contribution to the common practice in the light of shared values' (Siep 2011, 130). Siep notices that in contemporary, pluralistic and flexible economies – and societies – Honneth's model appears to be too rigid. Or in such societies 'it seems difficult to conceive a concept of recognition which contains a specific number of social or socio-psychological relations' (Siep 2011, 130).

## LETTING RECOGNITION MAKE ITS COURSE

Bin  
Redescriptions: Political  
Thought, Conceptual  
History and Feminist  
Theory  
DOI: 10.33134/rds.372

146

*The Course of Recognition* is a dedicated study on recognition; however, Ricoeur had already worked on the topic. After having previously described how agents develop their identities and are able to see themselves as *ipseities* in *Oneself as Another*, in the *Course* Ricoeur analyses the encounter with the other. It faces the dialectic of the encounter that is grounded on the asymmetry. Accordingly, the *Course* focuses on preserving the differences and acknowledging the distance between the subject and the other, the *proper distance* that allows for intimacy and respect. Insights that, I suggest, can be of use when applied to relational theories of autonomy.

One first difference with Honneth's conception is that in *The Course* the concept of recognition possesses a cognitive dimension: one can recognize what one has previously known. That is to say, Ricoeur creates a space between knowing and recognizing

that cannot be theoretically filled: the space between the active dimension and the dimension of passivity, the game of reciprocity [. . .] in acting, in sociality and in the community, just to mention some of the aspects with which the polysemy of recognition displaces any theory of knowledge.

(Polidori 2005, X)<sup>2</sup>

One of the main attempts of Ricoeur's work is to provide an account of recognition that does not reify such a concept. So, instead of choosing recognition of identities, Ricoeur opts for recognition of capabilities. In *The Course of Recognition*, in fact, we see the domain of capabilities traced in *Oneself as Another* expanding and transforming. In addition, this allows Ricoeur's theory to be flexible in terms of understanding personal identities. In fact, the aim is to recognize the *ipseity*: the fact that the self has a narrative structure and for sure 'an identity provides us with a script that is important in the orientation of our lives. But we want our lives *not too tightly scripted*' (Marcelo 2011). Identities change and, therefore, we need a theory of recognition that can capture this. I argue that this point is specifically of interest considering relational autonomy and the fact that autonomy is plastic, and is subject to the different situations agents encounter.

To avoid the risk of essentialism Ricoeur introduces the concept of *gift*.

Let's recall that this is disinterested gift-giving: we're in a state of agape. In this sense, as Boltanski noted, there is no remembrance of the past. A gift that would demand a return wouldn't be a gift: it would be market economy. On the contrary, a successful gift, in this sense, forgets about itself in the own act of giving. So the gift in return is a *second first gift*.

(Marcelo 2011, 122)

Accordingly, the process of gift-giving can be described as a symbolic recognition that asks to recognize the other, before asking to be recognized. For as abstract as this might seem, it preserves the diversities of stories, contexts agents have,

---

<sup>2</sup> Agape can be described as an attitude of giving without expecting to receiving. Where there are no expectations or desires. Those in a state of agape focus on others and their necessities. Those, at least, are the characteristics of agape as described by Boltanski. Ricoeur describes this state of agape as a dialectic of love and justice, mediated by the act of the gift.

preserving individualities in a relational framework. I suggest that this aligns with Meyers's relational conception of agency (Meyers 1989). For instance, the account of self-governance she promotes considers how each of us is provided with different qualities. That is to say that everyone has specific capabilities, and we can not reduce the ipseities to identities. Instead of precluding to some agents the status of autonomy, it focuses on the understanding of the particular. For instance, a lack of self-authorization can depend on abusive family contexts, economical policies or gender-based socialization, according to the singular experiences.

On top of that, a recognition model based on the concept of *gift* preserves the three dimensions of love, legal relationships and solidarity, but it avoids the risk of essentialism. It allows us to structure the discourse surrounding autonomy through the dialectic of the encounter. It preserves the model presented in the last chapters, by framing it in a structured theoretical background.

Furthermore, the idea of gift allows Ricoeur to challenge the market logic (or bad reciprocity) that, as previously said, characterizes Honneth's conception. Accordingly, even relational autonomy – that depends on recognition – is framed in a context that stresses how autonomy can not be reified, it is a property that emerges from the encounter, not a permanent achievement.

While considering *The Course* it is worth mentioning that, for as much as from different perspectives, both Honneth and Ricoeur emphasize the role of suffering, and of practices such as marginalization when analyzing recognition. In addition, according to both authors agents are always embedded in a net of relationships that deeply influence their subjectivity. On top of that, 'both authors want to take thick identities into account and both are opposed to excessive procedures of formalization or proceduralism' (Marcelo 2011, 117). This is specifically of interest considering relations autonomy: it allows the comparison of those three theories.

To deepen Ricoeur's notion of recognition, I introduce the two complementary concepts of Ideology and Utopia, as the author did in his *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*. The analysis of the two concepts shifts the perspective of recognition and focus on the role of power elites in depicting minorities and in perpetuating patterns of exclusion (Moyaert 2011). This aligns with the commitments of relational autonomy to analyze those conditions that hinder the development of autonomy, such as policies of marginalization (Oshana 2005). Accordingly, the analysis of this work introduces a more *practical* character to recognition, when compared to the one in *The Course*.

If considered in its primary, and we could say positive, feature the concept of ideology describes the common horizon of shared values in a community. In fact, ideology is a sort of glue that holds together a community.

Every society possesses [. . .] a socio-political *imaginaire* – that is an ensemble of symbolic discourses that can function as a *reaffirmation*. As reaffirmation, the *imaginaire* operates as an 'ideology' which can positively repeat and represent the founding discourse of a society, what I call its 'foundational symbols,' thus preserving its sense of identity. After all, cultures create themselves by telling stories of their past. (Ricoeur 1984, 29)

The primary place where communities encounter ideology is the political sphere, where ideology functions as a legitimization of power and shows its second, more problematic, feature. Indeed the ideological discourse is a rhetorical tool used by those who are in charge to seek consent in a community. Or 'ideology is deemed to preserve the semblance of a social consensus. In the final end, ideological discourse revolves around power' (Moyaert 2011, 96). I briefly mention that it would be interesting to compare Jason Stanley's intuitions in *How does Propaganda work?* (Stanley 2016) and Ricoeur's analysis of the mechanism of legitimation of power. Indeed Stanley describes how propaganda – that has a similar role ideology has in Ricoeur's – affects agents' preferences ordering to preserve the status quo.

Ideology creates a symbolic horizon that influences social practices and policies, as well as public discourses. It influences the way agents think about society and the kind of policies they are going to support, and, therefore, the kind of opportunity conditions agents have in society. In this usage, ideology represents an obstacle to recognition. It promotes excluding practices that hinder agents' self-determining opportunity. As an example I mention Jason Stanley's example of the rhetoric of *merit* that is indeed justifying and disguising a managerial culture in the USA (Stanley 2016). In addition, propaganda reinforces practices of exclusion that diminish agents' self-authorization through, for instance, what Stanley calls not-at-issue content. Propaganda justifies the practices of marginalization and justifies the non recognition of certain socio-economical groups. Worth noticing is the fact that ideology, for Ricoeur, has not a real author, there is not something completely rational and planned behind it.

In addition, ideology is related to the concept of violence. The kind of violence Ricoeur talks about is not merely the one physical force. Indeed it is symbolic violence towards real subjects. Once again, I think a dialogue between Ricoeur's theoretical framework and relational autonomy on the concept of violence could be fruitful. Both theories point at the fact that violence is insidious, it is not only represented by huge acts, but also of the everyday acts of violence to which subjects are exposed. For instance, Ricoeur's representation of violence – as he also depicts it in *Il Diritto di Punire* (Ricoeur 2012) – is coherent and could support analysis such as the one presented by Marilyn Friedman's *Autonomy, Gender, Politics* (Friedman 2003) – just to mention one relational study that analyzes the relationship between violence- and autonomy-related competencies. In addition, on the relationship between autonomy and recognition, it is worth mentioning that to ensure agents' recognition – and therefore their autonomy as self-authorization – it is necessary to fight the small and daily acts of violence – such as micro-aggressions – faced by minorities or economically disadvantaged subjects.

This point also allows me to face one difference that was highlighted by Marcelo (Marcelo 2011) between Ricoeur's conception of autonomy and Honneth's. In a nutshell, from Honneth's perspective on mutual recognition, Ricoeur's theory might appear to be too weak. Indeed, 'for Ricoeur recognition is of the order of the symbolic gesture, for Honneth, it pertains to effective material realization' (Marcelo 2011, 118). Even considering the adjustments made through the concepts of ideology and utopia, from the perspective of *The Struggle*, Ricoeur's theory might not seem to provide the material conditions for recognition. However, I argue that from a ricoeurian perspective the small acts – such as the gift-giving act of recognition – are the one that allows to shift the perspective from a market logic to a more comprehensive one. Only by shifting our perspectives on those smaller actions, agents are then able to structure relationships differently. Consequently, they can influence practices of

mutual recognition that turn into policies or material conditions. The small acts shift and enlarge the symbolic order (Ricoeur 2012). I argue that by changing perspective on the other, they also ask for proper institutions and policies that assure recognition. This also aligns with a relational analysis of autonomy: it allows us to see how agents are autonomous in a continuum, it relates to their identities and self-constitutive moments. It stresses how a lack of autonomy is influenced by acts – as domestic violence, child abuse or undergoing racists and sexist comments on a daily basis – that pertain to agents' everyday life.

The mechanism of ideology applies when the community feels threatened by something new, as the immune system does when it deals with contamination. Ideology, therefore, influences practices of exclusion and marginalization. We can think, for example, about the rhetorical discourse often enacted towards immigration.

When strangeness is experienced as a threat to what is known, when the unfamiliar is associated with the excavation of the familiar, when change is opposed to tradition, ideological discourse flourishes. (Moyaert 2011, 97)

Utopia, on the other hand, represents a challenge, 'an imaginative way to shatter the present order in the prevailing ideology' (Ricoeur 1986, 647). Utopian counter-narratives propose an alternative symbolic order; they expand the horizon of significances in a certain society. Accordingly, they play a determining role in practices of recognition. By altering the perception that the other members have of them they allow the *ipseities* to fight for their recognition. Or, utopias attempt to change social norms and to turn practices of exclusion into inclusivity and respect for diversity. In addition, they also allow the recognition of those minorities or oppressed subjects, without having them necessarily fit in the ideology that is oppressing them. Utopia opens up the possibility for institutional and social changes that question the *status quo*.

By making explicit and public a differentiated perspective, these counter-narratives not only challenge the so-called shared framework of orientation and especially its presumed homogeneity, but they also highlight the violent nature of the social solidarity and bring its 'victims' into focus. (Moyaert 2011, 97)

Accordingly, I suggest that utopias are related to self-authorization. In fact, relational autonomy is not an all-or-nothing concept. Therefore, agents might come from abusive contexts and lack some degree of self-esteem, self-trust or self-respect. However, they might still possess some degree of them. On top of that, they might also still possess the cognitive skills, like imagination, that pertains to self-governance that allows agents to picture themselves, and reality, otherwise.

This point enables me to see one more difference between the two approaches to recognition that we've encountered, considering the concepts of recognition and *horizon of shared values*. Indeed

Ricoeur questions Honneth's opposition between traditional and post-traditional "solidarity," by stressing the constitutive [...] role of symbolic mediations in the formation of the "horizon of shared values," which serves as point of reference for the "social esteem" of the worth of individuals. (Picardi 2018, 4)

Before proceeding with the conclusions and analyzing the implication for a relational account of autonomy, I would like to point at one theoretical issue concerning Ricoeur's conception connected to this topic. It has been noticed that Ricoeur interprets Hegel through Kantian categories of community and reciprocity (Williams 2008). I think one solution could be to consider what Marcelo has called *Ricoeur's ambiguous stance on Hegelianism*. Or, considering that history has some elements that cannot be perceived and understood from within. Accordingly, Ricoeur assumes a post-Hegelian kantism by introducing the concept of *limitation* and through a *philosophy of hope*: he opts for a philosophy without absolute.

By choosing not to follow Hegel all the way through to Absolute Knowledge, Ricoeur limits himself to the conflict of interpretations and renounces the attempt to explain and understand everything. He thereby recognizes a residue of opacity and irreconcilability in all human existence. (Marcelo 2011, 114)

This implies embracing the possibility of paradoxical positions that aim to open the possibility for a philosophy of the finite and the acceptance of the irreducible other.

## CONCLUSIONS

The article discussed the importance of recognition for a theory of autonomy in the framework of relational theories. The analysis is fitting considering the twofold sense of the term relational. On the one hand, the adjective *relational* underlines the relationship agents have with their social contexts. In addition, by recalling the dependence on the social context, relational theories stress the role of interdependency and vulnerability. Or 'an adequate conception of autonomy must be responsive to the fact of human vulnerability and dependency rather than assuming a conception of persons as self-sufficient, independent, rational contractors' (Mackenzie 2014, 21). I suggest that this has some specific implications that go beyond an account of autonomy. Instead, it provides worthwhile suggestions concerning the nature of the self. Or that agents 'are essentially successors, heirs to the persons who formed and cared for them' (Baier 1985, 85) and that they require some specific political institutions that foster agents' relational autonomy.

Then, the article has referred to the multidimensional approach to autonomy, to better specify a way in which we can think about autonomy. It is a toll to depict the concept of autonomy in its flexible and plastic nature and it enables us to understand agents and situations in their complexity without over rationalizing, or idealizing them. It preserves the irreducible other by calling for a case-by-case evaluation of an autonomous action, for it relates to matters as one's family relationship or vulnerabilities that are different for each of us. A multidimensional approach shows how social contexts affect the *external* conditions to autonomy (self-determination), the *internal* ones (self-governance) and the relationship agents develop with themselves (self-authorization). Then, I have focussed on the third axes, self-authorization, that is the fact that agents

must have a certain sense of their own worthiness to act, or of their status as agents, which is not guaranteed by their abilities to act freely by reflectively authorizing their wills and their actions. (Benson 1994, 65)

While presenting the concept of *having a certain sense of worthiness* we have encountered the concept of recognition as a condition for developing appropriate relations to the self as self-respect, self-esteem and self-respect. Without those positive relations to the self, it is hard to see how an agent can portray themselves as the bearer of legit claims. Due to the exposure to manipulative, abusive or propagandistic contexts that lead to practices of non-recognition agents might not be able to fully develop positive relations to the self and, therefore, might not see themselves as competent agents and members of society.

To define the notion of recognition I have initially turned to Axel Honneth's mostly through his *The Struggle for Recognition*. I have highlighted how such an account stresses the role of practices of marginalization for recognition. This questions the nature itself of contemporary societies and it leads to the fundamental question of whether such societies are indeed able to solve this problem. I suggest that even considering his tripartition, the question is left open to determine which practices represent a way to foster recognition. For instance, even referring to Honneth's legal sphere, we should then investigate what we mean when talking about *legal relations* and determine whether it is enough to state that legal relations represent the second stage of recognition. Is a scheme inspired by legal positivism and linked to the concept of State compatible with recognition, or should it be considered through radically different perspectives on the phenomenon?

Accordingly, the tripartition Honneth offers is not able to challenge the symbolic order of society. It does not radically question the practices of exclusions (often institutionalized) in it. As Moyaert (2011) pointed out, Honneth's theoretical framework does not seem to acknowledge the fact that being recognized means something more than fitting in a society's evaluative standards and that the struggle for recognition, especially in the case of minorities.

To reply to those theoretical puzzles, the article introduced Ricoeur's theory of recognition. The concepts of gift, utopia and ideology have made it possible to trace an account of recognition that preserves the irreducible other. Specifically, the concept of utopia allows minorities, or victims of abuse, to picture themselves otherwise and to build counter-narratives that challenge the symbolic order of a society. Recognition, accordingly, is a work communities do that challenges the ideology that protects the status quo: it means re-discussing the status quo and challenging the structure of a community. For as much as this might seem to deviate from the topic of autonomy; however, if a relational account of autonomy requires evaluating the role played by social contexts in the development of autonomy, one important part of such an account implies questioning if all communities are able to foster agent's autonomy.

Therefore, aim of this article was to highlight the role of recognition for a theory of autonomy and to attempt to provide a theoretical framework for such a constitutive aspect of autonomy, by recognizing that

Central to that model of autonomy is the idea that the acquisition, maintenance, and exercise of the array of competencies comprising autonomy depends on the establishment of particular ways of *relating to oneself practically*, especially self-respect, self-trust, and self-esteem. (Anderson & Honneth 2005, 144)

This, consequently, opens the possibility for conceptualizing autonomy and recognition in light of the gift as a moment of recognition and acknowledgment of the alterity.

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, Joel. 2013. "Autonomy and Vulnerability Entwined." In *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, edited by Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds, 134–61. Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199316649.003.0006>
- Anderson, Joel, and Axel Honneth. 2005. "Autonomy, Vulnerability, Recognition, and Justice." In *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism: New Essays*, edited by John Christman, and Joel Anderson, 127–149. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511610325.008>
- Baier, Annette. 1985. *Postures of the Mind: Essays on Mind and Morals*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Benson, Paul. 1994. "Free Agency and Self-Worth." *Journal of Philosophy* 91: 650–68. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2940760>
- Benson, Paul. 2005. "Authority and Voice in Autonomous Agency." In *Autonomy and the Challenges of Liberalism: New Essays*, edited by Joel Anderson, and John Christman, 101–26. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511610325.007>
- Christman, John. 2009. *The Politics of Persons: Individual Autonomy and Socio-Historical Selves*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511635571>
- Deranty, Jean-Philippe. 2016. "Two. Between Honneth and Rancière: Problems and Potentials of a Contemporary Critical Theory of Society". *Recognition or Disagreement: A Critical Encounter on the Politics of Freedom, Equality, and Identity*, edited by Jean-Philippe Deranty, New York Chichester, pp. 33–80. West Sussex: Columbia University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7312/honn17716-003>
- Friedman, Marilyn. 2003. *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Honneth, Axel. 1996. *The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Honneth, Axel. 2002. "Grounding Recognition: A Rejoinder to Critical Questions." *Inquiry* 45, no. 4: 499–519. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/002017402320947577>
- Honneth, Axel. 2007. "The Irreducibility of Progress: Kant's Account of the Relationship between Morality and History." *Critical Horizons* 8(1): 1–17. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1558/crit.v8i1.1>
- Honneth, Axel. 2012. *The I in We: Studies in the Theory of Recognition*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Honneth, Axel. 2018. "How to Envision Social Progress Today?" *Social Imaginaries* 4(1): 157–69. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5840/si2018418>
- Honneth, Axel, and Margalit, Avishai. 2001. "Invisibility: On the Epistemology of Recognition." *Supplement to the Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 75(1): 111–26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8349.00081>
- Honneth, Axel. 2021. "1 Recognition Between Power and Normativity: A Hegelian Critique of Judith Butler". *Recognition and Ambivalence*, edited by Heikki Ikäheimo, Kristina Lepold and Titus Stahl, New York Chichester, 21–30. West Sussex: Columbia University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7312/ikah17760-002>
- Kikauner, Thomas. 2015. "Book Reviews." *Capital and Class* 39(1): 165–7. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309816814564973b>



- Mackenzie, Catriona. 2014. "Three Dimensions of Autonomy: A Relational Analysis." In *Autonomy, Oppression and Gender*, edited by Andrea Veltman, and Mark Piper, 15–41. New York: Oxford University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199969104.003.0002>
- Mackenzie, Catriona, and Natalie Stoljar. 2000. *Relational Autonomy Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy. Agency and the Social Self*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Marcelo, Gonçalo. 2011. "Paul Ricoeur and the Utopia of Mutual Recognition." *Études Ricoeuriennes/Ricoeur Studies* 2(1): 110–33. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5195/ERRS.2011.69>
- Meyers, Diana Tietjens. 1989. *Self, Society and Personal Choice*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Moyaert, Marianne. 2011. "Between Ideology and Utopia Honneth and Ricoeur on Symbolic Violence, Marginalization and Recognition." *Études Ricoeuriennes/Ricoeur Studies* 2: 84–109. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5195/ERRS.2011.49>
- Nedelsky, Jennifer. 1989. "Reconceiving Autonomy: Sources, Thoughts and Possibilities." *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 1: 7–36.
- Oshana, Marina. 2005. "Autonomy and Free Agency." In *Personal Autonomy, New Essays on Personal Autonomy and Its Role in Contemporary Moral Philosophy*, edited by James Stacey Taylor, 113–32. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511614194.009>
- Picardi, Roberta. 2018. "Self-Attestation and Dissymmetric Mutuality in Ricoeur's Theory of Recognition." In *Handbuch Anerkennung*, edited by Ludwig Siep, Heikki Ikäheimo, and Michael Quante, 1–6. Wiesbaden: Springer. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-19561-8\\_43-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-19561-8_43-1)
- Polidori, Fabio. 2005. "Introduzione." In *Paul Ricoeur, Percorsi del Riconoscimento. Tre studi*, edited by Fabio Polidori, IX–XX. Milano: Raffaello Cortina editore.
- Rancière, Jacques, and Axel Honneth. 2016. *Recognition or Disagreement: A Critical Encounter on the Politics of Freedom, Equality, and Identity*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1984. "The Creativity of Language." In *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage*, edited by Richard Kearney, 15–45. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1986. *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 2005. *Percorsi del Riconoscimento*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 2012. *Il diritto di punire*. Brescia: Morcelliana.
- Siep, Ludwig. 2011. "Mutual Recognition: Hegel and Beyond." In *Recognition and Social Ontology*, edited by Heikki Ikäheimo, and Arto Laitinen, 117–45. Leiden: Brill.
- Stanley, Jason. 2016. *How does Propaganda work?* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Taylor, Charles. 1992. *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition: An Essay*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Williams, Robert. 2008. "Ricoeur on Recognition." *European Journal of Philosophy* 16: 3. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0378.2008.00315.x>

#### TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Bin, Lisa. 2022. "The Role of Recognition for Relational Theories of Autonomy." *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 25(2):137–153. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.372>

**Submitted:** 31 January 2022

**Accepted:** 01 November 2022

**Published:** 01 December 2022

#### COPYRIGHT:

© 2022 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

*Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Helsinki University Press.