Is Intercultural Critique Possible?
An Examination of Recognition Theory

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It is difficult, living in the modern west, to conceive of approaches to social justice that do not focus entirely on economic forces. Many of us are familiar with theories of social justice that strive for the just distribution of money, goods and resources. As Nancy Fraser (2001) explains, such approaches have “supplied the paradigm case for most theorizing about social justice for the past 150 years” (p. 21). There is, however, an alternative approach to social justice that departs from the largely economic focus of distribution theories: recognition theory. Recognition theory centres on adequate acknowledgement of the many unique groups that comprise the global village.\(^1\) The most notable recognition theory scholar is Axel Honneth. Honneth took recognition theory from a tool in Hegel’s early work and launched it to a prominent position in the cannon of philosophy. Honneth has recently penned a response to two of his contemporaries – Arto Laitenen and Antti Kauppinen – in which he provides a valuable discussion of the role recognition theory can play in social critique. In doing so, however, he attempts to broaden the scope of his theory making it applicable to cross-cultural critiques. It is my contention that although recognition theory works well for internal critique, Honneth’s attempts to locate a universal ground for critical social theory may prove problematic upon application to scenarios of intercultural criticism.

Recognition Theory

Deriving from Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the basic tenant of recognition theory is that individuals require independent validation of the subjective

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1 Nancy Fraser believes the different approaches of these two camps to be reconcilable. For more, see: Fraser (2001).
conceptions they form of themselves. This validation is achieved through a process of mutual recognition. For example, if I deem myself to be autonomous, I seek to have that characteristic validated by another subject. That validation may come from either tacit acknowledgment – acting toward me in a way that indicates an acceptance of my autonomy – or explicit declaration on behalf of the other party.

When examining issues of social justice, recognition theory is generally applied to whole groups, rather than the individual members of those groups. In assessing a situation, we need only examine the recognitive demands of the group and the degree to which those demands are met. Each group has a unique set of qualities it deems worthy of recognition and these evaluative qualities are historically contingent. There is nothing objective about the particular qualities that a particular group thinks ought to be recognized or valued. For Honneth (2002), appeals to norms governing recognitive activity are neither transhistorically nor transculturally valid, neither “immutable [nor] objective” (pp. 503).

One modern example of this phenomenon is the value of individual franchise. For citizens of western democracies, to deny an individual the ability to vote or participate in government is to deny a basic human right. In our culture, it seems obvious that all people ought to have some degree of political participation. For Nancy Fraser, this right – which she called ‘participatory parity’ – comprised the cardinal right of humanity around which all recognitive activity ought to centre. However, in ancient Athenian society, it seemed equally self-evident that only adult male citizens should participate in government. Only upon completion of military training did an Athenian possess the political knowledge requisite for participation in political life. Since only adult males were suited for military training and because foreigners and slaves were not committed to the polis, it followed logically that only adult male citizens should participate in government.

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2 For another interesting early interpretation of recognition theory, see G. H. Mead’s (1934) sociological interpretation of Hegel’s work Mind Self and Society.
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To citizens of the modern west, the Athenian extension of franchise might seem crude; but it made sense to the Athenians in the context within which it was created. This is because values do not occur in a vacuum and they are not created independent of the humans who use them. Values are products of a certain people in a certain place at a certain time.

The Intersubjective Construction of Norms

The collection of variables on which values are contingent is referred to as a lifeworld. The example above indicates the differences between our lifeworld and the ancient Athenian lifeworld. We are all born into a specific lifeworld and we gradually come to learn how our own lifeworld operates. In contrast with our raw, natural inclinations, the socially constructed lifeworld is “a kind of ‘second nature’ into which subjects are socialized” (Honneth, 2002, pp. 508). It is through this socialization that we grasp the values and norms around which our lifeworld functions.

The socialization process of which we are speaking often happens without much effort. We learn the norms of our society simply through the navigation of daily life. Borrowing from Robert Brandom, both Kauppinen and Honneth claim that value norms take the form of “generalized behavioural expectations that we follow … implicitly” (Honneth, 2002, pp. 514). In other words, the value norms to which we adhere are manifest in our daily interactions. The process of learning to act normally in society is the process of learning these norms.

To use the word ‘learn’ here may be somewhat misleading. This is a very different sort of learning since we do not learn these value norms the same way we acquire theoretical knowledge. Unlike the learning of math or physics, we do not have a specific norm-teacher and we do not (often) articulate the material being learned. Rather, our classroom is the community, our teacher the members of that community and our tests and exams happen everyday as we manoeuvre through daily routines, actions and interactions. We evidence our
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knowledge through proper – or normal – social practice. The value norms we
learn are thus unarticulated yet manifest in daily practice. Take, for instance,
the meeting of a new person. If I were to meet a new colleague of mine, I
would most likely shake her hand, introduce myself to her and offer to help her
find her way around. I certainly would not ignore her, fail to introduce myself
or use profane sexual language. To use Brandom’s (1994) terminology, by
appropriately navigating this interaction I make clear my “practical mastery”
over the norms that govern the situation (p. 89). Even this mundane daily
interaction evidences some basic values we hold with regard to other people:
They are deserving of some level of respect, they deserve to know the people
with whom they work and they deserve to be treated politely, regardless of
gender.

Classifying this type of knowledge can be difficult. Since our
knowledge of value norms is rarely explicitly articulated, some might argue that
we do not ‘know’ the norms at all. Following Brandom’s lead, Honneth
disagrees, asserting that this knowledge is ‘knowing-how’ rather than a
‘knowing-that’ (Honneth, 2002, pp. 515). This knowledge is evident in our
practical mastery over the norms. Knowledge of these norms is made clear only
in contrast to demonstrations that evidence a lack of norm knowledge. In other
words, we only become conscious of these norms when the expected
behavioural pattern is broken. Often the violation of a norm is not frequent
enough to make it wholly explicit but the violation will nonetheless make us
conscious of its existence.3 Were I to have ignored my colleague or been rude
to her, this may have aroused some anger from my peers, but few would venture
to articulate the complex, context dependant value-norm I had broken
(Kauppinen, 2002, pp. 487). Yet this seemingly intuitive experience of norm-
violation is fundamental to internal critique based on misrecognition. If we are
to examine social issues using the recognition model, we must be clear as to

3 When the violation of a norm is too frequent, the norm no longer persists as the norm is
no longer the dominant expected social behaviour. In these instances, the violation may become the
norm given its frequency and a dearth of the now former norm.
what expected norm was violated. Examining social problems via recognition forces articulation of the implicit value violated.

As a matter of clarity, the emotional experience of misrecognition does not necessarily accompany actual misrecognition. Emotions are not always reliable indicators of failed recognition (Kauppinen, 2002, pp. 488). As Kauppinen (2002) instructs, felt misrecognition should merely indicate that we must reconstruct the norms we perceive to have been violated and bring them into an evaluative space (pp. 487-8).

Understood in this light, negative moral experiences are often an indication that some implicit social value norm may have been violated and deserves investigation. Suppose I had said to my colleague: ‘a women’s place is at home, not in the workplace’. The moral injury she would inevitably suffer would evidence the violation of some fundamental norm – viz. that women ought to be recognized as valuable members of the workplace to the same degree as their male counterparts. If anything positive can come out of these negative moral experiences, it is a forced reflection on the imbedded social norm(s) violated. It is here that we begin to see the full power of recognition theory in internal social critique. The application of recognition theory forces the reconstruction of implicit moral norms violated. If we are to demonstrate that a token of misrecognition is deserving of correction, we must make explicit the tacitly held norm it has violated.

Articulating implicit norms is paramount for social critique. An effective critique will illustrate an incongruence between norms implicitly adhered to and actions that violate those norms. The most effective and frequent use of this type of recognition claim comes from children. Consider the following example to help illuminate the rhetorical power of this type of critique:

Suppose Sally’s parents refuse to let her move away to college on the grounds that she is too young. Sally might argue that her parents allowed both of her brothers to move away to college at her age. She may argue further that she is in no different a situation than her brothers were at her age. Sally would
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effectively be arguing that she ought to be recognized as deserving of coverage under the aforementioned norm. Having thus illustrated a norm implicit in her parents’ past actions and petitioned for adherence to that norm in this situation, Sally’s critique would likely succeed – provided her parents respond well to rational argument.

Internal critiques generally take the form of analogical arguments. The claimant must illustrate that the norm to which s/he is appealing is generally held then illustrate that the norm is not being applied in a given situation when it is nevertheless warranted. A critique that exposes a contradiction within a social system is likely to be far more efficacious than a critique appealing to external norms. Appeals to external norms – like justice, fairness or piety – are generally dismissed as vacuous or antiquated, whereas norms that demonstrated to be tacitly held are not so easily repudiated.

Recognition as a Fundamental Human Need

Some have objected to Honneth’s theory on the grounds that the norms of a given lifeworld are rarely consistent and often contain norms that contradict the norms that govern recognition. Continuing with the example of my colleague: suppose that I do not live in this lifeworld; rather, I live in lifeworld-\(x\). In lifeworld-\(x\), like this world, my colleague experiences moral injury upon hearing my rude remark; but unlike this world, citizens of lifeworld-\(x\) also demonstrate tacit adherence to the norm: ‘workers with high-seniority can treat workers with little or no seniority however they please.’ There is no principled way of adjudicating between the implicit norms of recognition and the implicit norm of seniority. The norms of recognition work against the norm of seniority and the norm of seniority works against the norms of recognition. This has led some to wonder why the norms of recognition ought to take priority over other norms (Kauppinen, 2002, pp. 493). On this line of thought, recognition is itself an intersubjectively defined and maintained norm implicit in our lifeworld. As
such, recognition appears to have no ontological superiority to other moral concerns and must compete with other lifeworld-contingent norms.

According to Honneth, the moral injuries suffered from failed recognition are far greater than any competing moral concerns and that we ought to give recognition norms priority over other concerns. For Honneth (2002), recognition is not simply a sign of the times, it is indicative of a fundamental human need: self-realization or autonomy (pp. 515). He makes no attempts to mask this bold assertion, explaining: “I do indeed assume that we should understand autonomy or self-realization as the overarching telos of our human form of life” (2002, pp. 516). In order to achieve full autonomy or maximize self-realization, we require recognition. To be precise, Honneth (2002) does not want to say that recognition is a pre-requisite for self-realization; rather, they develop together (pp. 516). In order for the process of self-realization to be maximally effective, we require a relation-to-self that can only be provided by mutual recognition. That is, mutual recognition supplies us with a sufficiently robust account of our self to facilitate attempts at the full realization of that self.

Honneth’s claim thus far is that recognition serves as a valuable means by which we may extract the norms implicit in society for use in social critique. Given his previous work – in which he argued for the fundamental human need for recognition as a mediator of self-realization – we may take provisionally that the norms of recognition deserve priority over other norms in any given lifeworld. Honneth’s account thus provides a compelling case for recognition theory in internal critique. His theory runs into problems, however, when he tries to use the universal goal of self-realization as a ground in inter-lifeworld critique.

Self-realization is a universal ground for Honneth (2002), since it is a qualitative necessity for any and all life (pp. 492). In any culture, at any time and for any people, self-realization is required to live a good life. However, as Kauppinen points out, the goal of self-realization may well be widely held while

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4 For Honneth’s full defence of this claim, see: (Honneth, 1995) esp. ch. 6 & (Fraser & Honneth, 2003)
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nevertheless not being wholly universal. Instead, Kauppinen suggests, the goal of self-realization may be a product of our lifeworld. Honneth disagrees with this claim, arguing that while the specific type of self-realization we have come to expect in this lifeworld is contingent, all lifeworlds seek some type of self-realization. In each lifeworld, there lies an implicit conception that specifies or indicates precisely of what autonomy or self-realization would consist. In this lifeworld, for instance, we understand self-realization and autonomy to require, primarily, access to government and social programs like education and healthcare.

If correct, Honneth’s solution may point to a universal ground which links varying lifeworld norms; but this will not translate into actual effective inter-lifeworld critique. For, as Honneth (2002) acknowledges, the specific token of autonomy and self-realization maintained by each lifeworld is contingent and thus not a basis for effective cross-boundary criticism (pp. 517). Suppose we were to attempt to criticise the exclusion of women from government in early Canadian society. Although 19th century Canada, like present day Canada, adhered to the implicit goal of self-realization, the two lifeworlds fundamentally disagree as to of what self-realization ought to consist and to whom it must apply. A criticism appealing to the notion of self-realization would fail to be useful because it would necessary appeal to the brand of self-realization to which modern Canada culture applies but to which 19th century Canada did not. The differing tokenings of self-realization make it a poor choice for effective inter-lifeworld critique.

Transhistorical Validity at the Expense of Transcultural Validity

In order to maintain the transhistorical validity of social criticism, Honneth (2002) concedes that he must assume the norms of a given lifeworld possess “normative superiority” over the norms by which they were preceded (pp. 517). He maintains that moral norms develop in a way that evidences an overall trend of progress. On this account, our current norms are a further development of
older norms and are normatively superior to them. Less evolved norms can thus be criticised using our current norms because our norms are implicitly contained within the other, developmentally prior norms being criticised.

Honneth admits that this notion of inherent progress is, as of yet, underdeveloped. He (2002) has thus far claimed that that each of the new and the ever-expanding value norms implicit in society “must be viewed as a progressive step in the historical process of cultural transformation” (pp. 511). As society (or a lifeworld) develops new norms, we must view this process as normative progression, not merely as a changing of the tides. This is only a brief sketch of what Honneth hopes will develop into a more robust account of progress. Because Honneth’s formulation of the concept of progress is still under development, I will refrain from criticising his justification of this principle and instead focus on the implications of using a notion of progress to justify inter-lifeworld critique.

I am more than willing to grant that, presupposing Honneth’s theory of progress, social critique can maintain transhistorical validity. If we are to understand diachronically primary norms as less-developed versions of our current norms or as in some way containing the current norms, critique of a lifeworld that adheres to the earlier norms may well be both justified and efficacious. For example, it is generally agreed upon that the practice of slave ownership in the American South was wrong. Slavery indefinitely impeded the self-realization of millions of African Americans and Aboriginal peoples for hundreds of years. Invoking the notion of progress, we can say that the implicit norms governing personhood and personal/legal recognition had not yet evolved or progressed to include all persons – as, presumably, that notion includes today. We can make this argument of transhistorical validity because the old norms in question can be historically shown to have developed into our current norms – arguably, the passing of the 13th Amendment represents the gradual evolution or expansion of the value of African Americans as deserving of personal and legal recognition. Using the notion of progress, we can advance effective, non-relativistic critiques of older normative systems. In this situation,
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it is easy to determine which set of norms is prior and which is latter because the difference between the two lifeworlds in question is time.

The problem arises, however, when it is more difficult to determine which of a set of competing set of norms is prior and which is latter. We encounter this problem when making intercultural criticisms during the same time period. Generally, when moral criticism is directed at a culture or group external to the criticiser, the charge of cultural relativism is brought forth. If G1 is to criticize G2, there must be some common ground between G1 and G2 on the basis of which G1 can make its criticism, lest G1 be charged with ethical relativism. Using Honneth’s conception of progress, we would have to argue that the G1 norm to which we are appealing is implicit, in some way, in G2’s norm-set. On this account, the norm of G1 is more progressive or further evolved than that of G2. This presupposes, however, that we can independently determine which of the two groups – G1 or G2 – has more evolved norms. It is my contention that this is a faulty supposition.

To illustrate this problem further, I will make use of a well-worn example, let us look at Western criticisms of female genital cutting (FGC) practiced in North Eastern Africa. For our purposes, allow me to suppose that we are dealing with cases of FGC that are voluntary; not cases of child-abuse, rape or torture. For sometime, the topic of FGC was a hot topic in Western media. I can recall distinctly watching media reports of the practice denouncing it as inhumane and outright immoral. The hype surrounding FGC has died out somewhat since its ‘discovery’ in the late nineties, but it still surfaces from time to time when we need reminding that we, the modern West, are the yardstick by which morality is judged. Generally, criticisms of FGC involve a variant on Honneth’s thesis: that FGC represses self-realization and/or women’s autonomy, to which respondents forward charges of ethical absolutism. Proponents of FGC often argue that the practice liberates women from overpowering sexual

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5 Most people are more familiar with the phrasing: ‘Female Genital Mutilation.’ I am here avoiding the term ‘mutilation’ because it seems to imply some normative judgment. I cannot conceive of morally ‘good’ mutilation.
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desires or that it symbolizes the transition to adulthood thus increasing women’s relation-to-self (Mhórdha, 2007). Even if we grant that both groups in this dialectic strive toward self-realization, we must acknowledge that the particular values associated with self-realization in each case differ greatly. Thus, on Honneth’s account, we must resort to the notion of progress to provide the common ground between the two groups.

To invoke the notion of progress here, we would effectively be arguing that the conception of self-realization to which we adhere and on the grounds of which we are criticizing FGC is implicit in FGC practicing group’s conception of self-realization in an underdeveloped form. The implications of this claim are surprising. To make this claim is to assert that the western conception of self-realization is a developed form of the African conception of self-realization. The degree of cultural superiority that must be assumed to make this claim is deplorable. It may be equally plausible, on this account, that the African conception of self-realization is the progressively superior account. Perhaps the values attached to their conception of self-realization allow women more control over their bodies. Women can control the amount of gratification they receive from sex, they can control the frequency that they feel sexual urges and they can control the amount of gratification that their sexual partners receive from intercourse. We might even go so far as to mention the Western infatuation with plastic surgery. It could be argued that plastic surgery seems to show that the African norms of self-realization are implicit in the less-evolved American norms. Since many Africans voluntarily undergo FGC to alter themselves both aesthetically and physiologically for sexual reasons, it is not entirely implausible to argue that the Western practices of breast augmentation and liposuction or the Japanese practice of feet wrapping are antecedents to FGC.

If we are to stick with the progress hypothesis, it appears as though each culture has a plausible claim to the title of progressively latter moral norms. There seems to be no process by which we may determine which norms are antecedent and which are consequent. It is tempting to argue that the norms that better allow for self-realization are progressively superior. Though this
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process, too, would be relativistic. It would require an appeal to a conception of self-realization that is not contingent on either culture; but there exists no such absolute conception of self-realization. Critics from both sides would argue that, on their construal of self-realization, their own practices better facilitate autonomy. Appeals to objectively superior self-realization are of little use.

We might instead argue that we must assume the criticizing culture is the more morally evolved culture – some would argue that this is how westerners generally conceive of themselves – but this commits the naturalistic fallacy. From every culture’s standpoint, intercultural criticisms that do not rely on illustrating contradiction within the criticised group always evidence the normative superiority of their own culture; otherwise they would not make the criticism in the first place. Theories of progress fail to solve these problems.

In sum, Honneth’s theory works well for internal critique based on extrapolated norms. The errors in his account only surface once he attempted to broaden the scope of his theory. By arguing that assumed historical normative progress will allow for better intercultural critiques, Honneth will inevitably encounter problems adjudicating between competing lifeworld-contingent norms. Without providing an additional account of the method by which we are to determine which norms are antecedent and which are consequent, Honneth may have to abandon the notion of progress and restrict recognition theory to internal critique – for which it works quite well.

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Works Consulted


