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Title: The social self: Identity-formation through love in recognition theory and in psychology.

On March 11, 2009 Tim Kretschmer, a 17 years old high-school student, went to his former high school in Winnenden, Baden-Württemberg, Germany and shot nine pupils, three teachers and himself. According to *Times Online*, Kretschmer was from an affluent family, was treated for clinical depression in the past, but ‘seemed normal’. Trying to answer why this happened, commentators refer to the fact that the father of the boy had weapons in the house and that Kretschmer played violent videogames like Counter-strike. In a letter to his parents before his rampage, he wrote: “I have had enough. Always the same. Everybody is laughing at me. No one sees my potential. I’m serious, I have weapons and I’m going to my old school in the morning and have a proper barbecue [...]”.

The main question asked by the survivors, their surroundings and the media was: *why* did this happen?

In this paper I try to connect social philosophical theory and empirical results from social psychological research and developmental psychopathology. Taking the perspective of Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition, I will show what ‘a socially constructed identity’ means, in what way love, respect and esteem are necessary conditions for a healthy identity formation and how this idea is supported by empirical studies. After introducing Honneth’s theory, I will give three examples from social psychology and developmental psychopathology. First, I will present some of the insights that Peter Fonagy gives on the causes of Borderline Personality Disorder. Second, I will discuss some interesting experiments and their outcomes of Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson on the performances of schoolchildren. And thirdly, I will come back to the theme of high-school shootings. But first I will go into the question why it is important to search for the meaning of a social identity.

In our contemporary popular discourse, identity is still seen as rather autonomous. Answering the question ‘Which philosophy book should every right-minded human being have read to

understand our contemporary world better?’ 44 philosophy professors in the Netherlands considered *A Theory of Justice* of John Rawls as the fourth most influential philosophical work of our time¹. The portrayal of mankind in a liberal philosophy as that of Rawls is rather individualistic. Although in Rawls’ theory, the notion of reciprocity (and a sort of inter-subjectivity) is important, he presupposes a rational (economical) subject: a ‘self’ that precedes its conceptions of the ‘good’ and its preferences, a self that can always revise those conceptions and preferences. Honneth’s theory of recognition can be said to be fundamentally different in that respect. According to him “human integrity owes its existence, at a deep level, to the patterns of approval and recognition”. Individuality, integrity, a sense of self or identity and hence self-image are constituted inter-subjectively and individuals in general are not equal and unequivocally competent.

Why is it important to shift from a more individualistic liberal notion of identity to one that is more social, what I call a ‘social self’? We can think of three reasons: a scientific, a pragmatic and a moral one. First, one of the goals of science is to better understand reality. If the theory of recognition is better able to explain why we as humans behave as we do, including our seemingly “irrational” behaviour, there’s more corroboration (the degree in which a theory withstood attempts to falsification up till now) and thus from a scientific point of view reason to adopt it (until it gets falsified). Second, if the new paradigm explains reality better, it enables us to control that reality better than did the old paradigm. We are more equipped to prevent undesirable things happening, such as the highschool-shooting. Thirdly, justice may be better served if we base law and policy on a paradigm that expresses realistically what may be demanded of and expected from individuals. The contention is that a paradigm based on Honneth’s recognition-theory does the job better than a paradigm based on Rawls’ theory or on other liberal theories. Those theories attribute (too much) autonomy to individuals, while they hardly ever have full control and often have little influence on situations they are held responsible for.

Back to the theory of recognition. She is based on the idea that our identity is shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition by others. It says that a person or a group of people can suffer real psychological and social damage, real distortions of their self-image and estrangement, if family, surrounding people or society mirror back to them a confining, a demeaning or a contemptible picture of themselves.²

¹ Filosofie Magazine, januari 2004, jrg. 13, nr. 1. Or: <http://www.filosofiemagazine.nl/artikelDetail.lasso?ID=2408&-session=NTses:3780B649A63FB90473DF7A47A299760E>

² Taylor, C. (1994), ‘The Politics of Recognition’, in: A. Gutmann (red.), *Multiculturalism; Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, p. 25-73.

Honneth's work 'The Struggle for Recognition' (1995) differentiates between three forms of recognition. All three are necessary and essential to being a full fledged self-conscious person: love, respect and esteem. Honneth considers all three to be essential for being human in the full sense of the word, because these three forms of recognition are linked to three levels of personal identity: basic self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. A healthy and fully-grown personality requires all three.

Love and self-confidence concern the affective relation aimed at the wellbeing and the fulfillment of needs of the concrete other - between parent and child for example, or between partners in a love-relationship or in a friendship. In this kind of relationship, people recognize each other reciprocally as dependent on vital care and devotion. Love is the most fundamental form of recognition because the development of basic self-confidence through love is a psychological pre-condition, necessary for the other forms of mutual recognition and self-respect to be realized. Referring to developmental psychology, Honneth argues that a balance between 'symbiosis' and ego-demarcation is important in these kinds of relationships if a healthy form of emotional attachment is to be attained. In relation to the significant other we are not independent, but interdependent. For this kind of recognition it is important that what one feels, thinks or wants *counts* for the other, so that one feels included and accepted.

Respect and self-respect, the second kind of recognition, is a legal form of recognition. It concerns the individual's sense of possessing a dignity, which should be universally attributed to persons. It is a prerequisite for the individual being a 'morally responsible agent', capable of participating in public deliberation. Individual liberties, complemented by political and social rights create a legal person that deserves to be treated as an equal to his fellow citizens. Our self-respect is dependent upon the recognition and therefore the respect we receive from others. We are not distinct entities endowed with rights, but interdependent persons in an unavoidable network of involuntary and voluntary relationships.

The third kind of recognition takes the form of social esteem, allowing individuals to relate positively to their concrete traits and abilities. Respect is universal: it generates an experience of recognition that one shares with all members of the political community to which one belongs. It makes participation in discursive will-formation possible. In contrast, social esteem is particular. Social esteem is about the evaluation of special habits, -social- activities and accomplishments that define a person and the differences between people. This evaluation is made on the basis of someone's contributions to the community's practices or in a broader sense to society. What counts as a 'useful contribution' depends on the value-

horizon of society. Thus, social conditions for esteem are determined by the prevailing sense of what is to count as a worthwhile contribution to society. To make sure that no member of society is denied the opportunity to earn esteem for his or her contribution to the common good, we need a society in which the common values match the concerns of individuals or in which the concerns of individuals match the common values in such a way that all individuals have a real opportunity for full self-realization.

Our self or our identity gets shaped by the love, respect or esteem of the other, so we have a social self. Love concerns 'needs and emotions' in primary relationships as in love and friendship. Respect is about 'moral responsibility' in legal relationships and about having 'rights'. Esteem is not exclusive to a certain elite but about the 'traits and abilities' of all that are to flourish in a 'community of value'; that is to say, people's use of their talents and their contributions must as a general rule result in esteem. Our self or our identity is in this sense social –we do not autonomously shape social contexts, based on our conceptions of the good and our preferences (as Rawls would more or less have it), but we are shaped by given contexts which we in turn help to maintain and influence.

These three levels of personal identity (self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem) have counterparts in three forms of violated identity: the violation of physical integrity, legal exclusion, and social degradation. The inversion of love is contempt. Contempt refers to violations of physical integrity by others, as in physical abuse, rape or torture, but also to denigrating treatments or just being ignored. We will see later that even these seemingly milder variants can cause severe damage to an individual. One does not count as an *individual*, but is denied. The counterpart of respect is the structural exclusion of certain rights within a society. One does not count as a *person*, but is denied. The third kind of disrespect exists if a (cultural) framework is structured so that particular kinds of personal convictions, ways of life, certain cultural or religious groups, certain persons or personal features are evaluated as deficient and inferior. One's *contribution* does not count, but gets depreciated or denied. The consequence being that those persons are not considered to have full intrinsic value and their ways of life cannot be considered as meaningful contributions to society.

On the love-level of this theory, a healthy identity-formation will only take place if a child gets recognition. It needs unconditional love and care from its primary caregiver, in order to be able to flourish. The research done by Peter Fonagy on Borderline Personality Disorder lends support to this. According to Fonagy, the cause of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) lies in an (emotionally) abusive family-environment, because of which the child cannot get securely attached to the parent and cannot develop the proper ability of

mentalizing. BPD is an enduring and culturally deviating pattern of cognitions, affectivity, interpersonal functioning and behavior (impulse control) with some of the following features: fear of being abandoned, unstable relationships with others, an instable self-image, impulsivity, self-mutilating behavior, affective instability, chronic feelings of emptiness, inappropriate, intense anger, transient, stress related paranoid ideation or dissociation. Fonagy links this pattern to the early development. When the emotional needs of a child are not sufficiently met, it does not learn the capacity of mentalizing, that is to say “to think about mental states as separate from, yet potentially causing actions”³. Mentalizing means to attribute intentions to the other person and to imagine why someone comes to a certain behavior. When we consider the other person’s behavior, it gets understood as also being caused by his/her mental state: a person is supposed to have needs, feelings, convictions, targets and reasons.

Let us describe briefly how this mentalizing function gets developed in an optimal parent-child relationship and subsequently show what can go wrong. (For convenience sake I will use the word ‘mother’ where the affective communication and attachment that I describe can also take place with another primary caregiver.) From birth on, the young baby and his mother are involved in an affective communication in which the mother senses the feelings of the child and adapts her behavior accordingly. She will show compassion when the baby cries and will smile back when the baby smiles. This is called mirroring. This ‘social biofeedback’ in the form of parental affect mirroring gives the child the opportunity to develop a second order symbolic system for his mental concepts. The emotions of the baby are as it happens in the beginning undifferentiated, but through the reaction of the parent he learns to label his affects – from the reaction of the parent he infers what his own emotion means – and consequently, to regulate his emotions. The mother does not cry along with the baby, but shows compassion and support, and as a result a second experience is placed besides the primary undifferentiated experience, that helps the child to organize his emotions. It is important that the reaction of the mother is congruent with that of the baby, because the child will otherwise make a misattribution with the result that he cannot organize his emotions, cannot label them and does not learn how he can regulate his feelings. In this primary attachment-relationship between the parent and the child, the latter goes through a process of primary consciousness of an internal condition (for example the diffuse experience of anger) to a functional consciousness (the idea of anger, that can also be described as being able to label the emotion: ‘this is anger’).

³ Fonagy, P., Target, M., Gergely, G., Allen, J.G. & Bateman, A.W. (2003). The developmental roots of borderline personality disorder in early attachment relationships: a theory and some evidence. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 23, 412-459, p. 428.

If the parent does not mirror the emotions of the child properly, the feelings of the child stay unlabeled, confused, un-symbolized and therefore he cannot regulate them. Fonagy describes this as follows: “For normal development the child needs to experience a mind that is concerned with *his* mind and is able to reflect his feelings and intentions accurately, yet in a way which does not overwhelm him [...]. This is the experience that a psychologically neglected child might never have, even if there can be no doubts about the provision of adequate physical care. The child who has not experienced the caregiver’s integrative mirroring of his affective states cannot create representations of them, and may later struggle to differentiate reality from fantasy, and physical from psychic reality”⁴. The cognitive capacity for mentalization is, according to Fonagy, “an important determinant for individual differences in self-organization” and their related characteristics of a competent person (selfhood) “such as self-consciousness, autonomy, freedom and responsibility”. Fonagy links these deficiencies to the phenomenon of BPS, in which the lack of a stable sense of a representative self is a central feature. The capacity for symbolic representation of someone’s own mental state is an essential condition for a sense of identity, but that is exactly what is missing in people with (severe) BPD. Those who suffer that sensation, lack love and esteem for themselves, but also an authentic, organic self-image that is built around internalized representations of mental states, according to Fonagy.

To rephrase this in Honneth’s terms: our identity is shaped by the recognition (love) we receive from others (our parents). Fonagy’s meta-research and his own results lend support to Honneth’s theory and illustrate what can be understood as contempt, the antipode of love. For being recognized as a child, food and shelter is not enough. Not only physical abuse really distorts the development of a young person. Denigrating treatments, or just being ignored can cause severe damage. However, in Rawls’ Theory of Justice, the emphasis is on schooling, financial equality and legal rights. Rawls interprets the inter-subjectivity of social ties as an ‘association’, that is to say as voluntary connections that are means for individuals to shape their selves and realize their more or less autonomous conceptions of the good. An individual can always withdraw from those associations and join others. Although Rawls admits that an individual can only gain self-respect through the respect he gets from others, and thus through participation in society by way of fair cooperation, that individual still precedes inter-subjectivity and so cooperation has the shape of voluntary association. This first example of the insights of Fonagy on BPD is a counterfactual to the presupposition that the individual precedes inter-subjectivity, as are the other two examples. They show how dominant social situations are and that society and social circles (family, groups, institutions) precede the

⁴ Fonagy et al., 2003.

individual. A positive self-image and the sense of being a valuable person can only get shape by means of positive validations by others. At the same time, the need for a stable and positive self-image is so deep that people can resort to violence to restore it or to compensate the lack of it. Honneth had good reason to call his book 'The *Struggle* for Recognition'.

Our second example can give the notion of recognition and especially the idea that our self or our identity is shaped by others (what I call a social self) more articulation.

Social psychologists Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson held an IQ-test at an elementary school. Afterwards they told the teachers that certain children would show a spurt in intellectual growth during the next few months. Only the teachers were told the test results, not the students. In reality, these children, the 'growth spurters', were selected at random and not on the basis of a test score. At the end of the school year the experimental group showed significantly greater gains in IQ and academic performance than did the control-group (their classmates)⁵. This phenomenon is also called a self-fulfilling prophecy. Although the teachers thought they treated their pupils equally and in the same way, their *expectations* affected their pupils' intellectual performance through subtle, largely non-verbal, mostly unintentional communication processes⁶. This study is replicated over and over again in a wide variety of schools and every time it has the same outcome⁷. As Aronson describes it: "If you were one of those teachers and were led to expect two or three specific students to perform well, you would be more likely to treat those students in special ways – paying more attention to them, listening to them with more respect, calling on them more frequently, encouraging them, and trying to teach them more difficult material. This in turn would almost certainly make these students feel happier, more respected, more motivated, and smarter, and – *voilà*- a self-fulfilling prophecy."^{8 9}

⁵ Rosenthal, R., Jacobson, L. (1968). *Pygmalion in the classroom*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston, New York USA.

⁶ Rosenthal, R. (2003). Covert Communication in Laboratories, Classrooms, and the Truly Real World. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 12, 151-154.

⁷ Harris, M.J. (1986). The Effects of Teacher Expectations, Gender, and Behavior on Pupil Academic Performance and Self-Concept, *Journal of Educational Research*, 79, 173-179.

⁸ Aronson, E., Wilson, T.D., Akert, R.M. (2005). *Social Psychology*, Pearson Education, New Jersey, USA.

⁹ We could connect this classical experiment with Honneth's theory of recognition and start to think about the implications of this experiment for some legal issues. Also subsequent research on these interpersonal expectancy effects (also called *Pygmalion effects*) shows interesting results if we want to link the concept of recognition with medical tort law, for example. We find that 'one study showed that surgeons who used a bossy tone of voice when talking to their patients were more likely to be sued by their patients than were surgeons who used a more respectful tone.' Quote from: Rosenthal, R. (2003). See also: Ambady, N., LaPlante, D., Nguyen, T., Rosenthal, R., Chaumeton, N. & Levinson, W. (2002). Surgeon's tone of voice: A clue to malpractice history. *Surgery*, 132, 5-9.

Research in social psychology suggests furthermore that one's performance is highly dependent on one's self-concept, which in turn depends on the social situation, such as the expectations of another person or other persons. For example, whether a child is 'neat and tidy' or 'good at mathematics' depends less on persuasion ('you *should be* neat and tidy' or 'you *should be* good at mathematics'), than on attribution by the teacher ('you *are* good at maths', or 'you *are* neat and tidy'). The conclusion in this specific research done by Miller and his colleagues¹⁰ was that the attribution groups had a much higher increase in self-esteem and in performance than the persuasion groups. So the children who were told that they were good in mathematics became good in mathematics and this effect was maintained after the experiment. The children who were told that they should perform well in mathematics initially showed an insignificant increase in their performance, but this dissipated over time. The researchers explained the difference in effect by stating that the attribution group was told that they were a particular kind of person, namely someone who is tidy or good in mathematics, and that this changed the self-concept of the children. On the other hand, "[i]n accounting for the relative ineffectiveness of persuasion, we may note first of all that persuasive communications urging a person to do something do not necessarily tap the internal self-concept or their target. Or still worse, to the extent that they do implicate a self-concept, they may involve the negative attribution that the person is not currently the sort of individual she should be, namely a person who is neat or works hard."¹¹

This kind of psychological research can illustrate what we mean by the social self, by showing how our identity gets shaped by others. On the other hand, we might be able to understand these psychological mechanisms better by framing them in the dialectical paradigm of recognition. For the flourishing of a young individual, financial means and proper schooling are not enough. The expectations of and the recognition by the surroundings may make or break someone's development and may determine whether he succeeds in society. This perspective in which we take the idea of a socially constructed identity seriously, is at odds with the idea of an autonomous self, the idea that a person's accomplishments in life merely depend on his or her own choices and efforts.

But in what way does Honneth's theory add something to the relevant psychological knowledge? For example, from research of John Bowlby, Donald Winnicott and Mary Ainsworth we know that children need a caring caregiver to develop into a fully healthy individual. Contrary to empirical research Honneth's theory is not only descriptive, but also normative. It gives instruments for detailed prescriptions on all levels of society to reach

¹⁰ Miller, R.L., Brickman, P., & Bolen, D. (1975). Attribution Versus Persuasion as a Means for Modyfying Behavior. *Journal of Personality and SocialPsychology*, 31, 430-441.

¹¹ Miller, R.L., Brickman, P., & Bolen, D. (1975), p. 438.

justice. This leads to a second question. Honneth's theory is based on the results of psychological research. How does he take the step from 'fact' to 'value', how does he produce a normative stance out of these psychological "facts"? Looking at existing social conflicts in which people struggled for recognition, Honneth argues that these conflicts contain a moral grammar. People do not just fight for a better position as a matter of fact, but they use moral language and have moral motives for doing that. We feel moral indignation when we register injustices of the kinds mentioned and not only compassion for the victims. Finally, we return to our high school-shooting in Germany. In this shooting as in others that occurred in the United States, the question is raised why it happened. Is it the fact that children these days get exposed to violent movies and computer games? Is it the easy availability of guns? Or are the youngsters who commit these massacres just crazy? For understanding, but also for prevention it is important to get insight in the causes of these extreme acts of aggression. In our German case, the finger was pointed at the father of the boy, who had weapons in the house. As to the motives we seem to be left with a big question mark. Although most of these youngsters might have had some psychological problems in the past, their "pathological behavior was not really predictable from their day-to-day interactions with parents, teachers, or friends" and often weren't noticed by psychiatrists.¹² I will quote Elliot Aronson, a social psychologist, who writes about the Columbine Massacre and other high school shootings that he has studied till 2002: "[T]o dismiss this horrifying deed as "merely" the result of mental illness would lead us to dismiss something of vital importance, something that might help us prevent similar tragedies in the future: the power of the social situation". The riflemen of Columbine Harris and Klebold suffered greatly by being taunted, bullied and excluded by the in-group at school. This analysis of what has been going on in their minds, is further "supported by the videocassette they left behind, which depicts them angrily talking about the insults and bullying they experienced at Columbine. According to psychiatrist James Gilligen (1996), the director of mental health for the Massachusetts prison system, the motivation behind the vast majority of rampage killings is an attempt to transform feelings of shame and humiliation into feelings of pride." This can also be noticed in the video left by Cho Seung-Hui, a boy who killed 32 people and himself in April 2007 in what was later called "Virginia Tech Massacre"¹³. In a general research on high school shootings carried out by Mark Leary and colleagues in 2003 the conclusion was reached that "[o]ur analysis of cases of school violence since 1995 supports the hypothesis that social rejection was involved in most of the cases of lethal school violence. Twelve [out of the fifteen] cases involved an ongoing pattern of teasing, bullying, or ostracism, and at least six of the perpetrators had experienced a recent romantic rejection. In only two of the incidents did we

¹² Aronson et al., (2005), p. 424.

¹³ The video can be seen on you tube.

find no clear evidence of rejection.[...] Several of the perpetrators explicitly explained their actions as a response to being mistreated by other students.” And so it is the case with our recent German case of March 2009 when he wrote: “I have had enough. Always the same. Everybody is laughing at me. No one sees my potential. I’m serious, I have weapons and I’m going to my old school in the morning and have a proper barbecue.[...]”.

By acknowledging the importance of the social situation instead of trying to find out who was individually responsible and determining what his predisposition was so as to supply us with reasons for his behaviour, we are better able to understand what happened (rather than “what he did”) to appreciate and evaluate the situation adequately and to prevent it in the future. These cases of violence show what can be the extreme effects of inadequate recognition.

We need to take seriously the human need of being included, of being recognized. As Charles Taylor has put it: “Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need.¹⁴”

¹⁴ Taylor, C. (1994), ‘The Politics of Recognition’, in: A. Gutmann (red.), *Multiculturalism; Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, p. 26.