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# How Honneth's Recognition Theory Can Further Empirical Deliberation Research

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A great number of studies on deliberative democracy have paid particular attention to a renewed relevance accorded to everyday talk, emotions, personal storytelling, and the so-called pre-political experience. Much of the debate has involved scholars contrasting their work with Habermas' theoretical framework to explore different sorts of expressions that can enhance critical reflection and conditions to enable members of disadvantaged groups to be heard and have their particular experiences, values, and interests understood. These studies typically argue that focusing only on argumentation and justification is restrictive. In this vein, a number of scholars – such as Andre Bächtiger, Jane Mansbridge, John Gastil, John Parkinson, Jürg Steiner, Tali Mendelberg, and Christopher Karpowitz, among others – have searched ways to build institutional initiatives and structure incentives for people and marginalized groups to deliberate, concentrating on mechanisms that can compensate for less than optimal conditions.

Axel Honneth's theory of recognition – considered the third generation of critical theory – helps analyzing power and inequalities by taking account of meaning-making from the perspective of participants in social conflicts. Despite sharing several premises within the Frankfurt School tradition, Habermas' and Honneth's research programs have developed side by side and have rarely intertwined in studies on deliberation. Recognition theory, by placing the notion of conflict between social groups and social struggle at the center of social

philosophy, enables researchers to develop new interpretations and explanations of a number of issues in deliberative theory.

For example, Axel Honneth's research agenda can be regarded as a continuation of Habermas' effort to provide access to a pre-scientific realm of moral critique. The need of citizens to more or less freely articulate their aspirations and interests, to acknowledge commonalities and differences and their commitment to other aims and the common good have long been a cornerstone of research on deliberation. Deliberative scholars who investigate everyday talk and story-telling – such as Jane Mansbridge, Laura Black, and Francesca Polletta (see also Steiner, Jaramillo, Maia, & Mameli, in press) to quote just a few – are particularly concerned with what Habermas calls “discovery of problems,” “interpretation of needs,” and “discourses aimed at achieving self-understanding” by affected individuals and groups. In a book recently published by Palgrave Macmillan (Maia, 2014), I investigate how Honneth moves from Habermas' work to construct a theory of recognition that links normative reflection and the concept of intersubjective conditions that are necessary for autonomy. Honneth's political philosophy helps deepening and refining the understanding of individuals' reactions to feelings of injustice, which are tied to plexuses of negative experiences in intimate, juridical, and social spheres. By articulating a broader notion of self-realization and intersubjective dependency, the recognition-theoretical approach is particularly relevant to deliberative scholars concerned with emancipation of disadvantaged groups and political praxis aimed at achieving justice. This book, developed in collaboration with six former doctoral students or postdoctoral fellowships and now colleagues, investigates some of the interfaces that the theory of recognition establishes with political communication and media studies.

In particular, the recognition-theoretical approach paves the way for researchers to tap into pre-political experience. In a study published in the *European Political Science Review*, my collaborator and I (Maia & Garcêz, 2014) explore how Honneth's theory of recognition opens promising venues for exploring the role of emotion in politics and discursive engagement in deliberation. It investigates storytelling of deaf people gathered from two digital environments: a website sponsored by social movement organizations and an online social network site. While endorsing Honneth's view that “feelings of injustice” are an important source for intelligibility of injustice, and that disadvantaged individuals need to build a “shared interpretative framework” in struggles for recognition, we argue that a more nuanced account of discursive justification is needed to deal with dissent and moral disagreement. This study shows how Habermas' and Honneth's theoretical frameworks can be jointly applied in empirical research to better equip researchers concerned with practices that aim to overcome injustice.

While most scholars support the view that deliberation is a rare phenomenon, critics should be more attentive to people's motivations to engage in discussion and deliberation. Insofar as Honneth's theory produces insights into various levels of individuals' struggles to be seen by others as self-determining agents, not to be looked down upon, not to be considered as second-class citizens or treated unjustly in the sphere of work, one can find new explanations for why a person feels compelled to make oneself understood, and dispute conflicting values and interests. By re-appraising how individuals' self-respect and self-esteem are linked to social conflict embedded in norms and political institutions, the recognition-theoretical approach aids in observing the critical potential for discussion and citizens' willingness to deliberate in everyday life. In previous studies concentrating on conflicts related to racism and homophobia (Maia & Rezende, 2016), we investigated how individuals engage in "moments of deliberation" not only with the "other," but with "multiple others," in a complex web of relations in society. Findings show that platforms with distinct affordances (YouTube, blogs, and Facebook) provide different opportunities and constraints for people to frame personal expressions and engage in discussion, in a conflictive field of respect as well as disrespect. While individuals are not completely free to decide what order of justification they will use in order to attempt to solve a certain problem, or challenge a particular judgment, results of this study published in the *Journal of Computer-mediated Communication* (Maia & Rezende, 2016) suggest that attacks on a personal level have a more deleterious impact on deliberation than offenses to others' opinions. Disrespectful commenters are more likely to justify their claims; and depending on the targets of profanity, disrespect has varying effects on deliberation.

Honneth's research program can also provide new insights to articulate domains that typically tend to be treated separately, such as critical sociology and political theory. Like Habermas, Honneth identifies a pre-theoretical basis to critique everyday life, but starts with the practical relationships of disrespected subjects and morally motivated struggles for expanded forms of recognition. Therefore, the recognition-theoretical approach captures the complexity of the interrelated dynamics of everyday talk, deliberation, mobilization, and activism, which are likely to be treated in separate fields of study. In an article published in the *Journal of Political Power* (Maia & Cal, 2014), we analyze patterns of recognition that are conveyed in legal rules and institutions as well as in actions of advocacy agents before they find expression in practices in a given lifeworld.

In our case study, media professionals acted as agents of advocacy, following discourses against domestic child labor vocalized by NGOs and local social movements as well as nationwide and transnational entities. Prompted to reflect on them, women who worked in domestic labor in their childhood challenged the discourse of newspapers and defended this practice as useful for their self- development. This study contributes to better understanding the conflictive assessment of justice and injustice by advocacy agents or political representatives and affected individuals. In this case, deliberative theory allows learning about how to achieve mutual understanding and clarifies what is to be taken into account and recognized in each particular social situation.

In yet other research (Maia & Vimieiro, 2015), we investigate the role of advocacy agents, social movements, and moral entrepreneurs to readjust cultural notions of the individualization and social inclusion of disabled people; and in bringing an ever-greater range of differences of values or ways of living to the public sphere. We analyze how the production and reproduction of public reasons help to re- arrange institutions in terms of recognition. Even when institutionalized, norms, rights, and policies are open to permanent contestation with the aim of disclosing flaws, limitations, and inadequate interpretations.

In summary, Honneth's contributions can revitalize studies on everyday talk and deliberation within a network of governance (see also Mendonça & Maia, 2014). We have learned from political communication studies that in an increasingly hybrid media environment connections across governmental networks and social spaces are more intricate in contemporary societies. Therefore, everyday talk is arguably becoming ever more relevant for processes of politicization regarding the discovery of problematic situations, the conversion of topics into issues of public concern, and the public review of political decisions within deliberative systems (Maia, 2012, in press-a, in press-b). I believe that the theory of recognition provides powerful insights for advancing research on deliberation; and that it poses a challenge to engage in more theory building and empirical investigation in the field of political communication.

## **Notes on contributor**

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