The "identity skills" presupposed in Honneth's early recognition theory: social struggles, normative legitimacy and mental resilience

Nicolas Cuneen

Note: This unpublished text roughly corresponds to the fourth chapter of *Reconnaissance et education identitaire: compétences identitaires et gouvernance scolaire.*

Abstract: In this article we seek to contribute to the discussion on recognition, psychological vulnerability and identity work by conceptualizing a blind spot in Honneth's foundational work. To do this, we propose the concept of "identity skills", or the skills involved in developing a sustainably positive, and thus continuously transformative, relationship with oneself. Our hypothesis is that Honneth presupposes the existence of approximately five such skills when dealing with social movements and the perspective-taking involved in evaluating normative legitimacy, while he presupposes the absence of these same skills when tackling the issue of psychological vulnerability and mental resilience.

Keywords: recognition, identity skills, Honneth

The conversation on recognition has come a long way since Axel Honneth's *Struggle for Recognition* was first published in German in 1992. The idea that identity's relational constitution begets a fundamental intersubjective vulnerability has become widely accepted, so much in fact that a new emphasis on avoiding recognition-themed "suffer-mongering"[1] has emerged. Honneth himself has progressively distanced himself from his own foundational work, first by abandoning his central reference to G. H. Mead early in the century[2] and then by remoulding his reflections regarding autonomy into a theoretical framework centred on a three-fold concept of freedom[3].

The premise of this text is that, despite the various developments and disavowals, Honneth's early theoretical position still has something important to teach us. Specifically, *The Struggle for Recognition* (*SFR*) harbours a powerful blind spot that has yet to be brought into focus, one regarding the preconditions for certain types of identity-laden work. Our hypothesis is that, at various moments in Honneth's early theory, there is recurring presupposition concerning both the presence and absence of what we will call "identity skills", or *the skills involved in the development of a sustainably positive, and thus continuously transformative, relationship with oneself.* As we will aim to demonstrate, Honneth's theory seems to count on

---

[1] L. McNay, "The politics of suffering and recognition: Foucault contra Honneth." In *Recognition theory and contemporary French moral and political philosophy: Reopening the dialogue*, eds. M. Bankovsky & A. Le Goff, pp. 54-69, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012, p. 64.

[2] A. Honneth, "Grounding recognition: A Rejoinder to Critical Questions." *Inquiry* 45, no. 4 (2002), pp. 499-520, p. 503.

[3] A. Honneth, *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life.* Cambridge: Polity, 2014.

the pre-existence of approximately five such skills when dealing with social movements and the perspective-taking involved in evaluating the legitimacy of norms, while it seems to presuppose the absence of these same skills when discussing mental resilience.

While the establishment of a general theory of the role of "identity skills" in identity work remains out of the scope of this article[4], one important caveat needs to be made. Namely, it would be a mistake to assert that the mastery of any set of skills is a sufficient condition for successfully engaging in autonomy-oriented reflexive identity work, that is, work consciously aimed at developing and maintaining a sustainably positive relationship with one's moral identity. The language of *skills* describes complex forms of practical capacity (know-how) susceptible to training and mastery, which mobilise knowledge and lower-level capacities to help resolve encountered problems[5]. Importantly, this language cannot encompass other important components of identity work, pertaining namely to attention and choice. One specific form of attention seems to particularly condition the fruitful use of identity skills. Indeed, attention paid to the non-essential character of identity (the self's constitutive non-identity with itself) is crucial for avoiding reifying tendencies that can permeate otherwise highly reflexive forms of self-work. While skills, once mastered, can be seen as deploying automatically whenever an apparently relevant problem is encountered, an attentional orientation requires both vigilance and environmental support[6].

With this caveat in mind, our critical epistemological approach will take us through the three aforementioned theoretical moments concerning social struggles, the perspective-taking involved in evaluating normative legitimacy, and mental resilience. Since the issue of perspective-taking in Honneth's work is particularly thorny and ends up impacting the other theoretical moments, its treatment will occupy the lion's share of our argumentation. Despite the stark differences between the three issues at play, by addressing them together we hope to provide a clearer picture of the blind spot that traverses contemporary work on recognition.

Identity work in social struggles

The preface to *SFR* lays out the main theoretical goals pursued in the text. Honneth seeks to lay the groundwork for a normative social theory and to explain certain processes of social transformation by shedding light on the moral logic (or "grammar") of social struggles. While his normative goal is addressed by underscoring the psychological vulnerability at risk in moments of identity shock, where the disappointment of normative expectations[7] causes one to see oneself through others' eyes in a harmful way, his historical-explanatory endeavour is centred on the notion of social movements. The main idea is that, when the normative expectations of groups of people are similarly and systematically disappointed, and when

---

[4] See N. Cuneen, *Reconnaissance et éducation identitaire* : *compétences identitaires et gouvernance scolaire* [*Recognition and Identity Education: Identity skills and school governance*]. P.I.E. Peter-Lang : Brussels, 2021, ch. 5.

[5] P. Perrenoud, *Construire des compétences dès l'école* [Building Skills in School]. Paris: ESF, 1998, p. 79.

[6] Y. Citton, *The Ecology of Attention*. Trans. B. Norman. Polity: Cambridge, 2017 [2014].

[7] For the reader unfamiliar with Honneth's work, *normative expectations* refer to those tacit expectations about how one is supposed to behave. While these expectations unconsciously shape our attitude toward the world as long as they continuously met, their disappointment brings them to the cognitive forefront: we become aware of the norms that we consider legitimate when our corresponding unconscious expectations are broken by another's behavior.

individuals manage to link up their own discontent to that of a larger population whose frustrations are anchored in the same institutional conditions, they may band together to abolish those conditions. While Honneth doesn't pretend that there is anything inevitable about this process[8], he nonetheless sketches out a vision of how individuals' sense of what's right, awakened by perceived injustice, can become the motor of historical progress.

Honneth thus paints a picture of how identity and social struggles are intertwined. Most importantly, these struggles are seen to be motivated by individuals' desire to have the legitimacy of their moral identity vindicated by a larger community. When a situation is experienced as unjust, but there exists no institutionally-recognised language through which one could seek out reparation or at least articulate one's hurt[9], the paths to psychological repair are limited. Joining a social movement thus brings forward individual moral identifications to the level of collective action. Ideally, the traumatic experience can be narratively resignified through involvement in addressing the institutional sources of systematic injustice.

One of the key conditions that needs to be met in order for individuals' experiences of injustice to feed practically-consequential social movements lies in the articulation of their collective discontent. Without a sufficiently common flag[10] to federate desires for a better world, experiences of injustice often lead to self-blame, scapegoating, or, at best, individualised reparation. By joining a movement whose collective identity is grounded in shared moral identifications, victims of injustice can invest in their own psychological resilience by giving meaning to their suffering, all while working to prevent future infringements.

In *SFR*, Honneth focuses on the case in which individuals are able to identify an existing social movement that seems to give voice to their feelings of injustice. However, it is clear that such movements are not always available, in which case someone needs to take the first step in framing collective action possibilities. Similarly, there might be a movement that lines up well enough with one's experiences of injustice, but whose effectiveness remains contingent on some sort of transformation. We will briefly touch on these latter two cases after addressing the former.

The first case, described most explicitly by Honneth, is that where an individual realizes that his personal feelings of injustice were triggered by an experience whose institutional source has also produced parallel experiences of injustice within a certain population, some of whom have already banded together to eradicate the problem at its root[11]. Honneth is not blind to the difficulty involved in this realisation, which first and foremost requires the individual to

---

[8] A. Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition. The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts.* Trans. J. Anderson. Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press, 1995, pp. 138-139.

[9] This idea comes up in Jean-François Lyotard's notion of *tort*, and is explored more systematically in Miranda Fricker's recent work on cognitive justice. M. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

[10] E. Renault, *L'expérience de l'injustice* [*The Experience of Injustice*]. Paris: La Découverte, 2004, p. 184.

[11] A. Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

correctly decipher the trajectory of his affective reaction. A series of emotional skills[12] are thus already required to articulate one's negative feelings as being rooted in an experience of injustice. To avoid lashing out blindly in reaction to unsettling feelings, political resistance requires one to clearly distinguish between the actual injustice and the role played by one's own interpretative particularities that colour the moral quality of the traumatic experience. Similarly, emotional skills are required to tune in to the emotional economy of others, in order to perceive parallel affective dynamics at play within existing social movements that express shared concerns differently.

However, identifying a suitable social movement is only the first step in identifying *with* that movement. Sociologists David Snow and Doug McAdam[13] lay out a range of identity work involved in creating, maintaining and presenting identities that fit with and support an individual's self-image while simultaneously linking him up to a politically-themed collective identity. Two main fields of work are put forward, namely *convergence processes* by which individuals seek out groups whose values they already identify with, and *identity construction processes* that are required when one's personal self-image appears to be incoherent with the collective identities of those movements that effectively address the source of one's discontent. The authors distinguish between four types of work in this second field, namely, the *amplification* of an existing yet overshadowed identity, the *articulation* of two identities whose combination provides a suitable identity substrate for identification with the movement, the *extension* of an already-central identity that can be made to involve new responsibilities, relationships, situations or behaviours, and, finally, a more radical *biographical reconstruction* in order to allow for congruence with a movement that, prior to the identity transformation, would have appeared as entirely alien.

It is unclear whether or not these sociologists see such forms of identity work as conscious processes. Certainly, the level of reflexivity involved in such work varies from individual to individual. Nevertheless, regardless of how aware one is of the fact that one is altering one's relationship with oneself, the types of identity work described rely, minimally, on a series of imaginative and narrative skills. The mastery of narrative tools and the capacity to form novel mental images, sometimes treated conjointly as the narrative imagination[14], play a key role in reconfiguring the story one tells about oneself and one's potential political actions. Without a honed capacity to reconfigure relationships of intrigue[15] between disparate elements of the self, a stuck narrative can prevent feelings of identification with those groups whose political goals align with the motivation rooted in one's experiences of injustice.

---

[12] M. Mikolajczak. *Les compétences émotionnelles* [*Emotional Skills*]. Paris: Dunod, 2009.

[13] D. Snow & D. McAdam, "Identity Work Processes in the Context of Social Movements: Clarifying the Identity/Movement Nexus." In *Self, Identity and Social Movements*, eds. S. Stryker, T.J. Owens & R.R. White, pp. 41-67. Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

[14] J. Brockmeier. "Human Agency and the Narrative Imagination." *Theory and Psychology* 19, no. 2 (2009), pp. 213-233; R. Kearney, "Narrative Imagination: between ethics and poetics." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 21, no. 5/6 (1995), pp. 173-190; and M. Von Wright, "Narrative Imagination and Taking the Perspective of Others". *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 21 (2002), pp. 407-416.

[15] P. Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre* [*Oneself as Another*]. Paris: Seuil, 1990, ch. 6.

Honneth's early model is visibly limited in that it ignores those cases where a *collective* identity must be either forged or transformed in order to address systemic injustice. Though it brings us slightly away from *SFR*, a brief look at these cases will reveal the necessity of skills similar to those already mentioned.

The emergence of a new collective identity requires a robust collective action frame (CAF), which plays a series of key roles in coordination collective action, ranging from the diagnosis of social ills and novel forms of victimhood or harm, to the prognosis of specific political goals, to the motivation of social actors by supplying them with "vocabularies of motive"[16]. The framing power of such CAFs varies according to their capacity to make certain phenomena salient within larger social narratives. A successful CAF thus supports a social movement and the collective identity that emerges from it by enabling the expression and perception of collective interests as well as their institutional obstacles. However, putting together an effective CAF is no easy feat. Its effectiveness is conditioned by its flexibility and rigidity, its exclusivity and inclusivity, its empirical credibility and internal coherence, as well as its intelligibility within larger social narratives. It seems therefore that the elaboration of such an interpretative frame will require sophisticated narrative and imaginative skills to forge a compelling story, linguistic-dialogical skills to articulate of new terms or slogans, as well as critical thinking skills to ensure the internal coherence of a movement's claims. To the extent that a group's collective identity is reliant on a compelling CAF, and to the extent that the reparation of an individual's relationship with herself depends on her enrolment in a social movement, these skills can already be seen as playing a role in supporting the development of a sustainably positive relationship with oneself.

Finally, once a movement is off the ground, there is still work to be done in order to ensure that its political goals are effectively pursued. Movements' underlying CAFs and the collective identities they support will both inevitably undergo transformations due to internal and exogenous pressures. However, the *way* they are transformed plays a pivotal role in their capacity for social impact. One key characteristic pertains to the inclusion of exogroup perspectives in the work of issue framing. With Marc Maesschalck[17], we can distinguish between *collective* representations, understood as the fruit of a particular group looking to frame a phenomenon based on their shared experiences, and *social* representations, which are articulated from reference points shared by the entire population of a social environment. As Maesschalck points out, in order for members of a larger community to feel concerned by an issue and be motivated to enter into serious good-faith dialogue about it, they must feel like the issue's representation does not solely belong to any group, even the one most directly affected by it.

The articulation of a societal issue from different social viewpoints brings us to the thorny question of perspective-taking. As we will demonstrate, all of the skills invoked so far are, in

---

[16] R. Benford & D. Snow, "Framing processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment". *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000), pp. 611-639.

[17] M. Maesschalck, "Harcèlement moral et action collective. Une approche normative de la prévention à partir des représentations sociale". In *Le harcèlement. De la société solidaire à la société solitaire*, ed. M. Sanchez-Mazas & G. Koubi**,** pp. 139-156. Brussels: Éditions de l'université de Bruxelles, 2005, 142.

a specific sense, also the skills involved in "taking another's perspective"[18]. While certain emotional, narrative, imaginative, dialogical and critical skills are already directly mobilised in developing an identification with social movement and in forging or transforming collective identities and their supporting CAFs, the impact of these skills in sustainable identity work becomes particularly clear when viewed through the lens of individuals' capacity to get closer to another's way of thinking.

Perspective-taking and the legitimacy of norms

The concept of "perspective-taking" is central to *SFR*, due to Honneth's reliance on Meadian developmental psychology[19]. Indeed, the identity shock mechanism at the heart of Honneth's theory is a direct extrapolation from Mead's view on how reflective self-consciousness is born. For Mead, the capacity to take oneself as an object of one's own consciousness is built through successive attempts to imaginatively reconstruct others' perspectives in which one appears as a social object. Similarly, Mead sees moral identity construction as hinging on children's capacity to infer moral perspectives from social behaviour and generalize them into an overall sense of right and wrong. In Honneth's view, when a seemingly legitimate normative expectation is disappointed, the individual sees himself in the imagined perspective of his interaction partner(s) in a way that threatens to destabilize the positive relationship he has forged with himself, and thus the autonomy that is anchored in the positive relationship he has with his moral identity.

Leaving the issue of identity shock for our final section, two key questions emerge at this stage. First, what makes a norm legitimate, and how can one be sure that the normative expectations that are disappointed in an experience of injustice are well founded? Secondly, what exactly does it mean to "take another's perspective"? Our treatment of the first question will lead us directly to the second.

Let us start by defining normative legitimacy with Rainer Forst as "*the quality of a normative order that explains and justifies its general binding power for those subjected to it*"[20]. As Forst argues, normative legitimacy is grounded in one or more normative sources, such as justification narratives that structure the space of reasons within a given society. Recognition ethics and its vocabulary of identity harm can therefore be seen as an attempt to justify a new normative source – or even *the* new normative source[21] – that would allow groups to ground the perceived legitimacy of certain normative expectations within a coherent justification framework.

What, then, makes a normative expectation legitimate according to recognition theorists? In *SFR*, Honneth gives no real criteria, limiting himself to the descriptive angle offered by Mead,

[18] See this article's precursor: N. Cuneen, "The skills of perspective-taking". *Les carnets du centre de philosophie du droit* 175 (2019), pp. 1-27.
[19] G.H. Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.
[20] R. Forst, *Normativity and Power. Analyzing Social Orders of Justification.* Trans. C. Cronin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 133.
[21] E. Renault, *L'expérience de l'injustice*, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

according to which those normative expectations that are perceived to be reciprocal within the socialization process are thereafter experienced as legitimate[22]. However, in other texts from Honneth's early period, Honneth goes further in elaborating potential legitimacy criteria. This is an important evolution since, without normative criteria associated to each sphere, we are left with a paradoxical situation in which normative expectations are seen as legitimate if they are acquired during the socialization process, but "struggles for recognition", which are in fact struggles to have the legitimacy of new norms recognized, are motivated by nothing more than a subjective desire to have the world better fit one's feelings about justice. Insofar as these feelings can motivate movements demanding the persecution of minorities, to take an extreme though perhaps not uncommon example, it is crucial to have tools capable of evaluating the legitimacy of one's normative expectations prior to taking up collective arms against a sea of troubles.

As a reminder, in *SFR*, Honneth distinguishes between three "spheres of recognition", relating to love, rights, and solidarity, each of which is seen as playing a distinct role in a person's autonomous capacities. Five years later, Honneth published a text[23] in which he associates each sphere with an ethical tradition, thus giving us a clue as to the potential criteria he might have employed for evaluating legitimacy within each normative space.

Honneth begins by associating the sphere of love, or personal relationships, with the ethics of care. In this sphere, situational circumstances call us to meet the asymmetric normative expectations of close relations in such a way that they are recognised "as an individual whose needs and desires are of unique value to another person"[24], which affords the foundations of basic psychological self-confidence. The expectations in question thus relate to emotional concern, and while Honneth asserts that they "cannot simply vary with the historical period or the cultural frame of reference" due to the "largely invariant logic associated with the intersubjective balance between fusion and demarcation"[25], it is hard to ignore that social changes have altered acceptable thresholds of emotional concern, in parent-child as well as romantic relationships. In the latter case, over the last few centuries in Western societies, expectations that wives can legitimately and realistically address to their husbands have taken a gradual trajectory towards equalization with respect to expectations in the other direction. Similarly, forms of corporal punishment such as spanking or meal-deprivation are seen as acceptable parenting tools in some societies but not others, and their acceptability varies over time. What, then, could make a new normative expectation within this sphere legitimate? In order to avoid the legitimisation of any new demand of increased asymmetric emotional concern, recognition ethics seems constrained to only admit the legitimacy of those new norms that benefit someone else than the person who introduces them.

Next up is the sphere of rights, where mutual respect forms the psychological foundation of self-respect. Honneth inscribes this sphere within the Kantian tradition, envisioning a

---

[22] A. Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, *op. cit.*, p. 78.
[23] Honneth, "Between Aristotle and Kant: Recognition and Moral Obligation." Trans. J. Farrell. In A. Honneth, *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, pp. 129-143. Cambridge, Polity, 2007.
[24] *Ibid*., pp. 138-9.
[25] Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

symmetrical relationship of mutually-recognised and equivalent rights and duties. Here, new norms would thus be subject to the following straightforward yet abstract criteria: they must be universalizable and the mutual respect of these norms must allow for the recognition of each person's autonomy and moral responsibility.

Finally, Honneth states that there is no specific philosophical tradition that corresponds to the sphere of solidarity[26], the sphere that forms and protects a person's self-esteem and ultimately their motivation to continue developing their personal qualities. The criteria of universalizability certainly cannot apply, since Honneth argues that a person's social value, which must be recognised in this sphere, makes no sense outside of the value horizon of a specific concrete community[27]. Despite Honneth's assertion that no ethical tradition corresponds to this normative sphere, in another text he affirms that the normative criteria associated with Habermas' discussion ethics are applicable precisely within such a specific concrete community[28]. While an author such as Emmanuel Renault defends the position that norms in all spheres must, in the end, have their legitimacy confirmed through criteria that resemble those of Habermas[29], Honneth remains firm in claiming that discussion ethics can apply neither to the sphere of love nor to any universal obligation, except, in the latter case, to the extent that humanity shares a common goal that overrides all cultural differences[30]. When it comes to a concrete community, however, we might say that, if all members were to share their ethical perspectives in a discussion free from domination and temporal constraint, the agreed-upon norms would be legitimate.

At this point, we are thus left with a series of criteria for determining the legitimacy of norms. All norms are *perceived* to be legitimate if they are acquired during the socialisation process, but their "true" legitimacy lies in a selfless increase of emotional concern (1st sphere), the possibility of Kantian-style universalization (2nd sphere), and the incorporation of the interests and values of all those community members involved in recognizing the social value of individual particularities (3rd sphere).

However, there are problems with dividing up legitimacy criteria according to the spheres to which specific norms belong, precisely because the three-fold division can only be approximate. Many normative expectations have a foot in at least two spheres, as is well demonstrated by issues relating to family and working conditions that are subject to legal codification, causing the sphere of rights to infringe upon the other two. To the extent that certain groups are not afforded equal rights to work, their particularities are not recognized as having the same social value as others'. Similarly, the spheres of love and rights overlap when a government takes away children from parents who give them inadequate care, even if this care is of the same quality as that which the parents received as children.

---

[26] Honneth, "Between Aristotle and Kant,", op. cit., p. 139.
[27] Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, *op. cit.*, p. 128. To give an example of our own: imagine a mason who is extremely adept at building unmovable stone houses. Were he to belong to a nomadic society, the value of his otherwise impressive skills would not be recognized, since the group's way of life renders them all but useless.
[28] A. Honneth, "The Other of Justice. Habermas and the Ethical Challenge of Postmodernism." Trans. J. Farrell. In A. Honneth, *Disrespect, op. cit.*, pp. 129-143, p. 123.
[29] E. Renault, *L'expérience de l'injustice*, *op. cit.*, p. 273.
[30] Honneth, "The Other of Justice", *op. cit.*, pp. 122-4.

In light of these difficulties, Renault's insistence that recognition ethics essentially collapses into discussion ethics at the level of normative legitimacy becomes more compelling. If we cannot reliably determine to which sphere belongs a contextually-situated normative expectation, recourse to the ethical perspectives of a wider community seems like a reasonable option. However, Renault's reading of Habermas is particular in that he remains unconvinced by the *procedural* aspect of discussion ethics[31], opting instead for a more generic criteria, according to which norms are legitimate to the extent that they incorporate the ethical perspectives of all those concerned, without any reference to idealized discussion procedures. This version might in fact sit better with Honneth, who does not express much enthusiasm for the "transcendental idea of a discourse free from domination"[32]. Following Renault, we could then say that the best way to approach an understanding of the contextual legitimacy of a given norm is to try to integrate the ethical perspectives of those concerned[33], which starts by engaging in some form of perspective-taking. Minimally, Honneth's early theory calls for a critical examination of perspective-taking in connection with the perceived legitimacy of norms acquired in the socialization process, as well as with the actual legitimacy of norms in the sphere of solidarity.

Renault's highly-generalized criteria, based on somehow adopting the ethical perspectives of others, also finds support from a series of other ethical traditions that articulate moral reasoning around a form of perspective-taking. Harking back to the abstract imagined perspective of Adam Smith's impartial spectator, the theme of impartiality associated with decentering from one's actual perspective has only grown more present over the last century[34]. Aside from Habermas, it has reappeared most notably in Rawls' veil of ignorance, a thought experiment in which the justness of a social order is to be evaluated by imagining oneself in an original position where one's particularities and social position are unknown, and then questioning whether or not one would consent to that order without being able to choose one's place. In this exercise, we must indeed begin by adopting the imaginary perspectives that we associate to other social positions and classes. In a variety of different forms, perspective-taking thus runs through many major contemporary tools for moral reasoning. As such, we could say that Renault's largely non-committal position on normative legitimacy is itself one of "overlapping consensus".

What, then, does it mean to "take another's perspective"? The term's everyday use would seem to refer to the imaginative simulation of another person's conscious mental state. This definition, or one close to it, is indeed operative in contemporary psychological theories. While we will argue that this understanding of perspective-taking is wholly inadequate when attempting to evaluate normative legitimacy, the limits of the cognitive-psychological paradigm are quite instructive.

---

[31] E. Renault, *L'expérience de l'injustice*, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 105.

[33] On the subject of Habermassian normative deliberation, Renault affirms that "such deliberations can only be adequately conceived if they are interpreted as the deployment of procedural rationality, because rather than consisting in decision-making informed by universal principles, they are more akin to an effort aiming to integrate distinct ethical viewpoints". *L'expérience de l'injustice*, *op. cit.*, p. 125, our translation.

[34] P.-É. Vandamme, "Qu'est-ce que le décentrement ? Moralité individuelle et justice sociale". *Ethica* 21, no. 1 (2017), pp. 167– 202.

Contemporary cognitive psychology has two produced main candidates for explaining the phenomenon of perspective-taking: simulation theory and *theory of mind* theory. While simulation theory posits a two-step imaginary process – imagining how we would feel or think in another's place and then corrected for perceived self/other differences –, theory of mind theory focuses on the development of "law-like beliefs" linking given behaviours to particular interpretative paths, which then allow for the deduction of mental and emotional states. According to Shannon Spaulding[35], while these two theoretical camps were once opposed to one another, their opposition has given way to a pluralistic view of the mental strategies employed to get closer to another's viewpoint. Certain contexts might then allow for the more direct simulative path, while contact with unfamiliar others might call for a more deductive strategy. Either way, depending on how much information or creativity is required to produce a workable image of the other's perspective, each strategy can be seen as collapsing into the other.

We will begin by examining some obstacles to "successful perspective taking" (understood at the accurate imaginative reproduction of another's conscious mental state) within the cognitive approach, before moving on to problems inherent to the psychological paradigm itself. Our focus will be on simulation theory, which better approximates the nonspecialist definition of perspective-taking as an activity of imaginative simulation.

In this theory's two-step process, we can immediately identify a series of obstacles at each stage. In the first, a series of highly-contingent factors might influence the way we imagine what we would think or feel in another's position. Among these we can include the affective colouration induced by our present emotional state, behavioural interpretations primed by unrelated recent events, or a faulty reconstruction of the context itself based on false equivalences between situational elements. In the second stage, where we are supposed to correct our initial simulation based on perceived self/other differences, things only get trickier. For those differences we can (somewhat correctly) perceive, such as race or gender, their usefulness in actually getting closer to another's perspective remains unclear, and recourse to stereotypes remains a constant threat. The work of correcting "how you would feel in a given situation" only gets more difficult when it comes to differences that cannot be observed. Privileged information, or knowledge I have that I don't know that you don't have, leads us to read others' behaviour in drastically different ways (as is demonstrated in every sitcom). More globally, an entire range of tacit suppositions form the cognitive background against which all meaning is produced[36]. Insofar as these suppositions are not shared by interaction partners, any divergence will lead to faulty simulation-correction. Different styles of reasoning, anchored in lay logic or highly sophisticated technical knowledge, can also influence the way we reconstruct another's view, all while remaining invisible to both parties.

However, these obstacles within the cognitive model are secondary to conceptual issues regarding the model itself. While a precise definition of "perspective" is not always given, the

[35] S. Spaulding, "Cognitive Empathy." In *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy*, ed. H. Maibom, pp. 13-21. New York: Routledge, 2017, pp. 13-15.
[36] J. Searle, "The Background of Meaning." In *Speech Act Theory and Pragmatics*, dir. J. Searle, F. Kiefer & M. Bierwisch, 221-232. Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1980.

psychological literature[37] seems to refer to a unitary mental state that is entirely accessible to the person it belongs to, and largely stable. In this light, "perspective-taking" refers to the simulative reconstruction of a conscious mental state, and its horizon of success would be defined by a direct match between the two conscious states. However, the issues of *accessibility*, *unity*, and *stability* raise serious questions when it comes to integrating others' ethical perspectives in an attempt to determine the legitimacy of one's normative expectations. Let's go over these three issues one by one.

The first problematic aspect of this view lies in the unconscious: the fact that another's ethical perspective may include important desires, feelings, beliefs or needs that they are either unaware of or have somehow repressed or pushed aside[38]. My interaction partner's cognitive background of meaning, which I obviously cannot anticipate, indeed remains largely inaccessible to the person whose perspective it structures. Similarly, it takes a measure of skill and practice for anyone to grasp the effects of their emotions on their conscious thoughts; if the other person has not done the work of identifying how their feelings are affecting their evaluation of a situation, must our simulative reconstruction include such identification? If we manage to identify this emotional interference, through careful listening and a stroke of luck, are we closer to or further from the other's perspective? What's more, we are not always honest with ourselves, and we are capable of casting aside uncomfortable thoughts and feelings that surface. Should the perspective-taker reconstruct these once-conscious elements? Finally, sometimes we are too proud to admit to ourselves that we need help when in fact we do; in this case, which version of the other's interests should be taken into account?

The second issue pertains to the supposed unity of others' perspectives. We are indeed capable of appreciating a situation from multiple distinct and sometimes incompatible perspectives; following Mead, it is precisely by virtue this capacity that we are capable of reflexive self-consciousness in the first place. If another's ethical perspective is split between two evaluative views, must the perspective-taker imaginatively reconstruct the split itself? Certainly, this is technically possible is extreme cases, to the extent that the other is capable of somehow expressing their own fractured take on the situation, but in most cases the lack of unity or coherence in another's view complicates the issue of which perspective should be "taken".

Finally, there is the issue of perspectival stability. While this poses no real problem for coordinating interaction through basic simulative activity, it does cause problems for evaluating normative legitimacy. The best way to get closer to another's perspective is by communicating with them, yet this communication itself is likely to alter the perspective in

---

[37] See, for example, K. Markman, W. Klein & J. Suhr. *Handbook of Imagination and Mental Simulation.* New York: Taylor and Francis, 2009. Also, S. Hodges, B. Clark & M. Myers, "Better living through perspective taking". In Positive Psychology as Social Change, ed. R. Biswas-Diener, pp. 193-218. Dordrecht/Heidelberg/London/New York: Springer, 2011.

[38] We do not need to follow a psychoanalytic approach in order to appreciate the role of the unconscious. An author such as Timothy Wilson explicitly rejects the psychoanalytic view while maintaining the myriad roles played by the unconscious in perception, communication and information processing. T. Wilson, *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious.* Cambridge (MA): The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002.

question. If a smooth-talker who feels like he is the victim of an injustice explains his plight to a friend in order to confirm the legitimacy of his reaction and receive emotional support, but ends up altering his friend's declared ethical perspective by framing the events in a certain way or by invoking unconsidered sources of ethical justification, which version of the friend's perspective counts (more) in determining the legitimacy of the disappointed normative expectation? On a larger scale, this issue resurfaces in the media's influence on populations' moral convictions and interpretative habits, which can then reappear in surveys that claim to represent organic moral trends[39].

Taken together, these issues cast doubt on the usefulness of "perspective-taking", understood as the imaginative simulation of another's conscious mental state, as a promising path toward evaluating the legitimacy of one's normative expectations. Yet, approaching an understanding of this legitimacy is crucial for developing a sustainably positive relationship with oneself. If we continue to entertain normative expectations whose contextual legitimacy is questionable, we set ourselves up for systematic experiences of injustice, which can cause psychological harm despite the absence of any "actual" injustice, since we still see ourselves as devalued through the projected perspective of our interaction partners. Similarly, if we devote ourselves to struggles for the recognition of a norm's legitimacy, when a larger community would not recognize it even with the most complete information and most extensive justificatory sources available, we risk exacerbating our suffering by multiplying the perspectives through which we see ourselves in a poor light.

With this is mind, it is worth pushing further in determining what form of "perspective-taking" can in fact help us judge the legitimacy of our expectations, in order to identify the skills that prove useful in this effort. A recent typology proposed within the framework of Jack Martin's neo-Meadian pragmatist psychology is instructive in this regard[40].

Taking as a starting point Robert Selman's developmental sequence of five levels of perspective taking, Martin and colleagues[41] undertake a reinterpretation and extension of Selman's model. Selman's five levels proceed as follows: a first stage sees the child interacting with others as distinct entities but without adjusting to their positions, essentially engaged in a socially-situated monologue; this egocentric stage gives way to a first level of perspectival self/other differentiation, that is, an acknowledgement of the difference in situational orientations that does not, however, include an appreciation of oneself through the other's eyes; a third level opens up to the first coordination of perspectives, whereby the child is able to simultaneously hold an understanding of his own perspective and that of the other, in which he may figure as a social object; a fourth level broadens the abstraction process, granting access to third-person perspectives, that is, generalized perspectives that belong to no one in particular, but to which all are beholden (like the rules of a game which may be appealed to in order to affect the other's actions); finally, Selman's final stage sees the

[39] As has been famously tackled in E. Herman & N. Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1988.

[40] An overview of Martin's approach can be found in J. Martin, J. Sugarman & S. Hickenbottom, *Persons: Understanding Psychological Selfhood and Agency*. New York: Springer, 2010.

[41] J. Martin, B. Sokol & T. Elfers, "Taking and Coordinating Perspectives: From Prereflective Interactivity, through Reflective Intersubjectivity, to Metareflective Sociality". *Human Development* 51 (2008), pp. 294-317.

adolescent engaged in highly complex perspective coordination, where multiple abstract perspectives (such as ideologies or worldviews) may be considered interchangeably, alongside those of the widening circle of individuals they find themselves interacting with.

Martin and colleagues see this picture as limited on both ends. First, they insist on the need to include a level of prereflective interactivity, with the child fully immersed in the relational field, which lays the groundwork for the following types of interaction. Second, they seek to extend the reach of perspectival development to a final level termed "metareflective sociality". At this level, the activity of perspective-taking becomes thematized in and for itself: the adult becomes aware of the limits of their capacity to take another's perspective through imaginative simulation, which allows for the explicit theorization of communicative strategies that might improve their understanding of others when the circumstances call for such an effort to be made. Interestingly, the authors offer up two distinct ways of approaching metareflective sociality. The first, which they associate with Jürgen Habermas, involves the arrangement of conditions that can ensure the adequate expression of the perspective of those involved, such as equal access to communicative resources, time and authority. This first "idealized" approach is cast against a second approach to metareflective dialogical engagement associated with Hans-Georg Gadamer. Eschewing universalizable procedures capable of ensuring mutual understanding, this second approach sees the adult adopting a vigilant attitude toward the fallibility of his own position, as well as that of any transmitted or adopted perspectives, in order to continually call into question the background assumptions that might determine the way she interprets the meaning of the other's words.

In this second approach, it becomes clear that the key to getting closer to another's perspective lies in a communicative posture through which one is careful to avoid getting fixated on any specific interpretation. The main effort required to hear the interests and needs of another person is one of *destabilizing interpretative habits* in order to avoid prematurely forming an impression that will colour all future listening and imaginative simulation. Others' needs and interests are the basic constituents of their ethical perspectives, but the way they are expressed is always contingent upon an enormous range of factors, pertaining to context, attributed word-meaning, important past experiences, or simply even unrelated recent events.

While *attention* paid to the contingency of the way others' needs and interests are expressed cannot itself be considered a skill, since vigilance and environmental support are required to maintain any attentional orientation, some skills may play an important role. Most obviously, dialogical skills are crucial in getting others to express their view clearly. Well-formed yet non-intrusive questions can help someone articulate parts of their perspective that they were not yet fully conscious of, just as unforceful interpretations of their view can offer them a chance to better articulate their own position. Even the capacity to listen actively can help someone open up, by showing them that the articulation of their perspective is desired.

However, dialogue itself does not suffice. While we have insisted on the incompleteness of the simulative approach to perspective-taking, a certain imaginative capacity is crucial for generating the right kind of uncertainty. First, in order to see the interest of opening up a dialogue with someone, we need to imagine that we have something to learn from them.

Second, there are situations in which dialogue is not feasible or appropriate, but in which certain imaginative skills can help us avoid premature interpretative foreclosure. Finally, dialogue itself relies on those same skills, in widening the range of potential meanings attributable to another's words. If we are unable to *widen the range of plausible interpretative hypotheses*, attention to our own fallibility or to the contingency of the other's expressive form will not get us very far.

The issue of formulating multiple interpretative hypotheses brings us back to the other four skills that appeared useful in the identity work surrounding social struggles. First, imaginative skills, allowing us to form mental images of non-present objects and situations, form the basis of our capacity to formulate various interpretative hypotheses. The impact of these skills is magnified by the mastery of narrative tools, which allow us to inscribe an action or an event into a series of narrative frames. Stories do much more than help us organize events in chronological order; the narrative context of any event is what generates its meaning for both actors and spectators. Without the capacity to conjure up a series of potential plausible stories surrounding another's words or actions, we are confined to the meaning-framing imposed by whatever narrative spontaneously emerges from our habitually-employed interpretative categories. The range of these potential stories is also conditioned by our emotional skills. Beyond their role in making us aware of how our current mood might affect our interpretations, a trained understanding of the potential complexity of emotional-relational dynamics is a decisive factor in appreciating the plausibility of many stories. Finally, the usefulness of these skills in generating a wide range of plausible interpretative hypotheses may also depend on having certain cognitive guardrails in place, in the form of critical thinking skills, so as to avoid theorizing so fanciful that it distracts from the reality of the situation.

There is certainly nothing evident about employing these skills in such a way that allows us to approach others' ethical perspectives by destabilizing our ingrained interpretative habits. Indeed, successful communication always involves a form of attention that cannot be acquired once and for all, as well as a share of luck. However, a certain mastery of these skills seems to be a necessary condition for embodying the metareflective sociality described by Martin and colleagues. While Honneth's early work relied on a Meadian account of perspective-taking in which simulative reconstruction is assumed to give an accurate-enough picture of others' viewpoints, this account falters most importantly when it comes to individuals' ability to determine the legitimacy of those normative expectations whose disappointment leads to either internalized self-depreciation or collective social struggles. If all feelings or experiences of injustice are unreflectively assumed to indicate the presence of actual injustices, then the social grammar of recognition is perhaps best suited to describe circular dynamics of self-victimization. Honneth quickly became aware of the fact that without coherent legitimacy criteria, recognition ethics risks legitimizing any struggle no matter how violent and unacceptable it is[42]. However, in *SFR*, he seems to presuppose the pre-existence of at least

---

[42] A. Honneth, "The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: On the Location of Critical Theory Today". Trans. J. Farrell. In A. Honneth, *Disrespect*, *op. cit.*, pp. 63-79, p. 77.

five skills at play both within social struggles and upstream of them, in the process of weighing the contextual legitimacy of norms.

Mental resilience

The final theoretical moment we wish to address is that of the identity shock mechanism at the very heart of both recognition theory's normative pretensions and descriptive goals. In Honneth's theory, identity shock is the crucial psychological consequence of experiences of injustice (or moral experiences[43]). When an individual's normative expectation is disappointed, he is said to imaginatively reconstruct the other's perspective in such a way that he himself appears therein as 1/ not enjoying bodily autonomy, 2/ not being a full member of a moral order in which mutually rights and obligations meaningfully motivate ethical action, or 3/ not having particularities that find value in the light of a community's shared goals[44]. If this experience becomes systematic, or if it is particularly strong, the individual's positive practical relationship with himself is said to be destabilized, robbing him of the psychological ground of autonomy. Indeed, Honneth claims, we need to maintain a positive relationship with a coherent moral identity in order to guarantee intrinsic motivation to act from our ethical identifications.

Most curiously, it seems that, in developing his identity shock model, Honneth presupposed the *absence* of those very same skills whose presence is assumed in the other two theoretical moments. While identity's relational constitution certainly does render it potentially vulnerable to such intersubjective shocks, these are by no means the automatic outcome of experiences of injustice. A closer look at the identity shock mechanism itself will help us see the protective role that certain "identity skills" might play.

In *SFR*, a moral experience is one in which the disappointment of a normative expectation causes an emotional reaction, which in turn brings the shocked individual to imaginatively reconstruct an image of himself through another's supposed perspective, in such a way that clashes with his current self-image, eventually distorting the latter. The components of moral experience are thus 1) the interaction context, 2) the individual's preceding self-image, with its associated normative expectations; 3) the other's behaviour, 4) the emotion that surfaces following the interruption of an action sequence that, with respect to the relevant normative aspect, was engaged in unreflectively[45], and 5) the imaginatively-reconstructed perspective of the other in which the individual appears as a social object represented differently than the way he currently sees himself[46]. If this experience is repeated, the individual's self-image is said to gradually conform to the image that figured in the other's imaginatively reconstructed perspective. Honneth's early identity shock model is one of a passive individual's identity deformation, but, when we break apart its components, it quickly becomes clear that the individual does not need to be as passive as Honneth's descriptions would lead us to believe.

---

[43] A. Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, *op. cit.*, pp. 162-5.
[44] Following Honneth's three-fold model of the spheres of recognition.
[45] *Ibid.*, pp. 136-8.
[46] Indeed, the other's mental state, conscious or unconscious, plays no discernable direct role.

Where can the individual intervene in this identity shock dynamic so as to protect himself from potential losses of autonomy? The key moment, though perhaps not the only one, lies in the activity of imaginative reconstruction. Here, the skills associated with perspective-taking reappear in a new light. In the same way that generating various interpretative hypotheses can help us get closer to another's perspective when trying to determine normative legitimacy by helping destabilize spontaneous interpretative habits, a similar effort can play the role of a buffer the potentially handicapping force of imagined perspectives. If we are only able to explain another's behaviour as being motivated by a single mindset, we are indeed passive in the exchange, and bound a form of denigration that is may be entirely self-afflicted. If, however, we are able to imaginatively conjure up a series of interpretative hypotheses, even the most plausible one loses some of its fatal weight. A gap is opened up for the possibility that the world does not see us this way, *even if our interaction partner indeed sees us in a disparaging way*. In the moment of imaginative reconstruction, the proliferation of interpretative hypotheses can attenuate forms of autonomy-weakening social determinism at two levels: the "content" of the other's perspective (or more generally the valence of the attributed evaluation) and the larger meaning of the act of disrespect (pertaining to one's value for society). Indeed, if we can create a wide range of plausible reasons or scenarios that explain the seemingly inacceptable act, a space is created for avoiding the negative psychological impact of denigrating behavior.

Formulating multiple hypotheses to destabilize spontaneous interpretations is mental work, however, and to engage it in we need to be made aware of the interest of doing so in a given situation. The affective component of the moral experience can play precisely the role of an alarm, with the help of certain emotional skills. Our emotions alert us to changes in reality that affect our plans and expectations. However, the meaning we attribute to emotions is far from predetermined. Among other things, it depends on the richness of our emotional vocabulary and our capacity to recognize the presence and complexity of specific emotions. The experience of injustice makes itself known first and foremost through moral feelings, such as indignation, revolt, anger, and sadness. To the extent that we learn to take these signs as a reminder to pay attention to the way we spontaneously reconstruct another's perspective, they too can play a protective role in recognition dynamics.

Upstream of the moral experience, the perspective-taking skills involved in determining normative legitimacy can play an important preventive role. Experiences of injustice can cause identity shocks whether or not the norm in question in legitimate, no matter what legitimacy criteria we employ; the broken norm must simply be experienced as legitimate for damage to occur. But generally accepted norms vary with time and place, and the range of contexts in which their legitimacy is grounded is not always clear. Keeping an ear open to others with a posture of fallibility can thus contribute to the precious destabilisation of certainty in the moment of shock, creating another obstacle between perceived injustice and automatic self-denigration.

Downstream from a moral experience, the multiplication of narrative frames from which the event and "received" image draw their meaning can also have an important impact on the

shock's lasting consequences. The field of post-traumatic growth[47] extensively demonstrates that the aftermath of traumatic experiences is far from predetermined. Many victims of real injustices manage to reframe their trauma in such a way that, instead of indicating a lack of subjective value, these experiences become powerful generators of meaning and purpose. While Honneth describes something similar in his model of social struggles, political action is not the only way to access the potential benefits of an identity shock. Reflexive identity work, or conscious action on the relationship one has with oneself, can be incited by such a shock and can open up the perception of new action possibilities and new sources of moral motivation.

It is perhaps less straightforward, but not impossible, for an individual to gain control over the context in which his moral experiences occur. Struggles to change certain institutional conditions that inform systematic interactions would indeed fall into this category. Some contextually-anchored ills are, however, self-inflicted. By becoming aware of the adverse impact of situations we choose to put ourselves in, we can better appreciate the interest of switching environments. However, this awareness relies, minimally, on a skilful interpretation of one's emotional reactions. More generally, it most likely requires openness to new environments and thus new ways of thinking, calling once again on skills involved in destabilizing certainty and interpretative habits in perspective-taking activities.

The other's behaviour is, of course, the element of the identity shock experience that we have the least control over. While dialogue might have a chance to affect their future behaviour, it would be a mistake to focus on this component as a lever of mental resilience.

Overall, by establishing identity shock as the normative core of recognition ethics, Honneth seems to presuppose a fundamentally passive individual whose relationship with himself is automatically endangered upon experiencing injustice. The same imaginative, narrative, emotional, dialogical and critical thinking skills, which appear necessary in his account of social struggles and in key aspects of the surrounding issue of normative legitimacy, seem to be absent in his theory of the subject of moral harm. In all cases, however, we believe that it is possible to identify a number of skills whose mastery is critical in developing a sustainably positive relationship with oneself. Years after *SFR*, Honneth conceded that it is possible to maintain such a positive relationship in the face of denigrating circumstances, but that such a task is difficult and unfair to ask of victims[48]. Fairness may however prove irrelevant in cases where the only person capable of resignifying experienced injustice is the victim himself, and, to that end, it is useful to identify the skills that facilitate such work.

Concluding remarks
While a more complete account of the role of "identity skills" in reflexive identity work remains outside of the scope of this text, we hope it may nonetheless contribute to discussion on the "internal" determinants of mental resilience, and thus sustainable autonomy, within an

---

[47] See, for example, S. Joseph & A. Linley, *Trauma, Recovery and Growth: Positive Psychological Perspectives on Posttraumatic Stress.* Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2008.
[48] J. Anderson & A. Honneth, "Autonomy, Vulnerability, Recognition, and Justice". In *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism: New Essays*, ed. J. Christman & J. Anderson, pp. 127-149. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 131.

explicitly relational framework of identity development and vulnerability. We have identified five broadly-construed groups of skills, all of which participate in a specific form of "perspective-taking" aimed at destabilizing interpretative habits, but these should merely be taken as an illustration. More generally, the concept of *identity skills* aims to sketch out a specific realm of capacity, namely, that of the trainable and eventually masterable components of reflexive identity work. Its larger value, explored elsewhere[49], lies in its capacity to delineate the boundaries between the skill-based, attention-based, and choice-based components of such work, in order to identify educational approaches for the development of the first two.

Instead, we sought to ground the concept of *identity skills* in an epistemological critique of Honneth's early work. Recognition theory has been a vital addition to contemporary critical theory, describing important psycho-social dynamics that continue to shape our individual, social and political responses to collective crises. As a normative theory, recognition ethics famously suffers from various forms of "psychologization"[50] that weaken its normative force. Read critically, however, Honneth's theoretical framework provides an excellent starting point for philosophical dialogue on the psychological prerequisites of both individual and collective self-empowerment, and eventually on educational strategies for resisting victimization and its accompanying psychological damage.

---

[49] N. Cuneen, *Reconnaissance et éducation identitaire*, *op. cit*.

[50] See N. Fraser & A. Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*. New York, Verso, 2003, pp. 31-42 ; R. Pilapil, "Psychologization of injustice? On Axel Honneth's theory of recognitive justice". *Ethical Perspectives* 18, no. 1 (2011): 79-106.