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When Doing Your Best Is Not Good Enough: Shaping Recognition in Sheltered Workshops
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Summary

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Shaping recognition in sheltered workshops

The interplay of activating institutions, professionals, co-workers, and a sociologist

Participation and recognition in activating welfare states

Full citizenship, inclusion, and participation of people with disabilities are important points on political agendas worldwide. Work is approached as *the* solution for less social exclusion and more participation of people with disabilities. Labour participation holds a big promise: it would give financial, social, and emotional gains, also or maybe especially in the case of people with mild intellectual disabilities, who have suffered (and often still suffer) from social exclusion.

One of the services that European member states designed to facilitate their participation on the labour market are sheltered workshops. While no official definition or overarching classification of different types of sheltered workshops exist, a general distinction is made between traditional and transitional ones. Traditional sheltered workshops provide permanent alternative employment to people with disabilities, while transitional ones are focused on their transition to the regular labour market. More and more transitional workshops are preferred because they would be more cost-beneficial.

Such transitional sheltered workshops, and young men diagnosed with a 'mild intellectual disability' working in them, stand central in this book. From this point onwards, they will be referred to as 'co-workers', the name they themselves preferred over 'clients' or 'people with mild intellectual disabilities'. As they reasoned, in the context of the sheltered workshops, they are primarily people who work on different projects, together with professionals and other young men. They literally 'co-work'.

The study starts with questioning whether being active and participating through work contributes to experiences of recognition. It attends to the power of institutions in shaping participation in a very specific way, and the implication this holds for experiencing oneself as a recognised and valued citizen. The central question of the study reads:

How is participation put into practice, and how does this shape co-workers' experiences of recognition?

In posing this question, it is assumed that discourses of participation shape young men's possibilities of being and feeling recognised. I investigate these discourses by looking at the ideals of participation that activating institutions articulate, and the ways they are put into practice by professionals working at the sheltered workshops on a daily basis.

In assuming a relationship between discourses of participation and experiences of recognition, the research includes a contrasting case, namely that of Portugal. It is expected that sheltered workshops in a country under the same umbrella of (influential) European participation policies, but with a distinct welfare history, put participation into practice in a different way. Potentially, experiences of recognition would also be divergent in such a context.

As I explain in Chapter 1 of the book, a 'recognition turn' took place in social theory in the 1990s: 'recognition' became a new cornerstone and an increasingly debated concept in welfare studies. Political philosophers Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser are two of the most prominent theorists of recognition.

Honneth is primarily concerned with the intersubjective, psychological, and emotional dimensions of recognition. He distinguishes between recognition as love, as respect, and as esteem. Relations of recognition are considered indispensable for people to develop their identities and practical self-relations (self-confidence, self-respect, self-esteem). For Fraser, not interactions between subjects, but the relations between institutions and individuals are fundamental for recognition, which she defines as equal participation in social life. Of crucial importance, then, are institutionalised patterns of value that allow, or do not allow, people to participate on an equal par.

The theoretical framework of the study highlights the usefulness of both theories and suggests combining them by turning to the broader sociological matter of 'subjectification'. With such an approach, the focus lies on how subjects, their aspirations, and interactions of recognition (Honneth) are fundamentally shaped by institutionalised discourses of 'good' participation (Fraser). As such, the research attempts to make an empirical, but also a theoretical contribution, and work towards a conceptualisation of recognition that is useful for empirically founded, sociological research.

An ethnography of sheltered workshops

In this book, I am looking for co-workers' experiences of recognition, and assume that these do not emerge out of nowhere, but are embedded in, and shaped by, the interplay of participation policies, professional practices, and daily interactions. It is this relationality, and the wish to research what recognition looks like 'from the inside out', that guided the set-up of the research. In Chapter 2, I describe its qualitative approach and the methods used, with participant observation being the main one.

Over the course of two years of fieldwork, I followed a total of 53 co-workers, 40 professionals working at the sheltered workshops on a daily basis, and 11 managers and coordinators in six different sheltered workshops. Both in the Dutch and Portuguese context, three similar types of sheltered workshops were selected: a technical workshop, a green-maintenance workshop, and a workshop whose similarity does not derive from the same type of work-activities but from its embeddedness in a regular company.

In spite of the existing literature from different fields (political theory, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, pedagogy), recognition is not an easy concept to research. We cannot see recognition, we cannot smell it, touch it, taste it. It might not even mean the same to different people. In approaching the main concept of recognition, the study therefore combines a variety of elements.

First, I go back and forth between broad observations and sensitising literature. Second, attention is paid to value constructions on the level of policy, professionals, and co-workers themselves. What ways of working, behaving, relating at the sheltered workshop are constructed as legitimate sources of recognition, both verbally and practically, i.e. what are co-workers proud of, what do they brag about, who do they make fun of? Third, co-workers are interviewed about their understandings and experiences of (mis)recognition.

Finally, assuming that recognition has an emotional aspect to it, efforts are put into observing and sensing co-workers' emotions. Getting to know the young men personally, almost as friends, and bringing in my own emotions and sensitivity, I try to distinguish between moments in which co-workers feel enthusiastic, happy or elated, and moments in which they feel unhappy, bored or miserable. It means I appoint heuristic value to my personal emotions in the field and, by bringing them through a moment of reflection, explore in what ways they can be productive for arriving at a deeper understanding of the concept of recognition.

'We don't feel that way at all'

Who are these young men - co-workers - who are the main characters in this book? What stories do they tell about themselves? One thing becomes immediately clear: they do not want to be seen or recognised *as* clients or *as* people with a mild intellectual disability. Stories about people they consider to be 'real' clients or to 'deserve' the diagnosis of mild intellectual disability evoke (negative) associations with dependence, abnormality, and a lack of progress in life. Linked to this, the few moments in which co-workers *did* identify as clients or people with an intellectual disability resulted in harm, feelings of shame, and misrecognition.

Against a background of being liable to misrecognition, co-workers tell a variety of self-stories. In Chapter 3, I group these stories together into four narratives: 'I am a little bit spastic'; 'I had a rough life'; 'I am a bad boy'; and 'We are all interdependent'. The different self-stories show, first of all, that the young men do not completely ignore the difficulties they come across in life. Second, they show that co-workers seek and find various ways of escaping potential experiences of misrecognition. On the one hand, they assign their difficulties to other, less shameful diagnoses. On the other hand, they explain their difficulties in such a way that it makes them less susceptible to negative evaluations and judgments. For example, it is less shameful to be 'stuck' at the sheltered workshop when it is a matter of bad luck, or when you ended up there because of your actions as a bad boy, than when it is because of your intellectual limitations.

Analysing co-workers' self-stories, what is striking is that the *first three* narratives all (re)produce the discourse that once made them feel ashamed and misrecognised: a discourse in which dependence, 'abnormality', and stagnation in life are negative. It is either something you need to get away from, something you need to be able to justify, prove you are not responsible for, or give a different meaning to. Only the *fourth narrative* ('We are all interdependent') slightly changes the discourse of (in)dependence. Dependence is no longer defined as undesirable or negative, but as a universal, human given.

In what follows, it becomes clear that the emphasis on dependence, 'abnormality', and lack of progress, which becomes apparent in young men's self-stories, is deeply engrained in policies of participation.

What 'good' participation is about

In the Netherlands, like in many other European countries, participation is presented as a panacea that can heal a range of social ills and combine a variety of goals. When looking more closely at European, national, and local policy

documents, two aims stand out. In encouraging the participation of people with disabilities, policy puts great emphasis on 'self-steering' and 'productive' work participation. Self-steering participation refers to a number of ideals such as self-reliance, self-control, personal choice, and independence. With productive participation, what is highlighted is that people have the responsibility to (learn to) contribute productively to society. Participation is, then, not merely about partaking in work activities, but about making products and delivering services that can be sold.

Self-management and productivity are juxtaposed in policy texts - at times explicitly, others implicitly - with what co-workers previously identified as shameful, namely participation that is non-productive, stagnant, and dependent on professional support.

Policy has ideas about recognition too. The more productive and self-steering co-workers become, so it is assumed, the more they will feel valued and recognised. Sporadically, policy hints at other possible sources of recognition, for example, through creating meaningful relationships with others. Policy's emphasis on self-management and productivity is summarised in Chapter 4 as an 'atomising' discourse of participation: what counts as good participation is predominantly based on co-workers' *individual* efforts to become more self-steering, on the one hand, and to take up responsibility for productively contributing to society, on the other hand.

While policy texts present the ideals of self-management and productivity as an immaculate combination, I describe their combination as being more problematic. On the one hand, people are obliged to participate and contribute productively to society; on the other hand, they need to be left free to make their own choices. The first people in line to deal with these tensions are professionals supervising co-workers at the sheltered workshops on a daily basis.

Putting participation into practice

How do professionals put policy's atomising discourse of participation into practice? In concrete aspects of work at the sheltered workshop — attending the place, initiating, and executing work tasks — the tensions between self-management and productivity become very clear. In their support practices, professionals sometimes fully embrace the policy discourse and stand in a 'consonant' relation to its goals, while at other times they reject parts of the discourse and act more in 'dissonance' with it. In Chapter 5, this distinction becomes the basis for crystallising different professionals 'roles': the (consonant) Director, and the (more dissonant) Teacher and Fellow.

The Director focuses on co-workers' personal choices, wants them to take initiative, to work individually, and to develop their technical skills. Most in line with policy discourse, the Director tries (but often fails) to uphold both goals of productivity and self-management at the same time. By contrast, the Fellow and the Teacher refer to policy's instructions of self-management and productivity, but hold that they are often untenable in practice. The Teacher assigns tasks without being too concerned about whether or not this is what the client 'really wants' (self-management) and without being concerned about being too directive. The Fellow neither nudges nor intervenes directly, but tries to make co-workers more productive and skilled by giving the example.

On balance, at the Dutch workshops, the professional role of Director emerged as the most common. As such, after passing through the hands of professionals, policy's discourse of participation predominantly remains the same: it is still 'atomising'. Participation is geared towards co-workers' individual efforts to become more self-steering, on the one hand, and to productively contribute to society, on the other hand. Under such a discourse of participation, how do co-workers understand and search for recognition?

The desire to outshine

Young men's understandings of recognition closely resemble Honneth's three forms of recognition. In Chapter 6, we first see that they explain recognition as something that needs to be earned and that can be communicated by valuing the other (either materially or symbolically) for his contributions and achievements (Honneth's 'esteem'). Second, they frame recognition as a moral imperative: all human beings have the right to be recognised. In this sense, recognition is about treating others equally, 'normally', and letting them live the life they choose to live (Honneth's 'respect'). Third, co-workers explain recognition in terms of the unique relationships of trust and loyalty they have with friends, family, lovers, and pets (Honneth's 'love').

When moving from interviews to observations, a striking discrepancy appears between what the young men say and what they do. While their *understandings* of recognition are diverse (recognition as esteem, respect, love), their *search* for recognition is coloured by esteem and by a principle of merit. Co-workers repeatedly want to have more than someone else, be better than others, and show off about it. In their search for love (friendships), they compete over who is most loved and who has the most friends on Facebook. In their search for respect (equal treatment), they compete over who is the most intelligent and independent individual. The principle of merit, theoretically linked only to the domain of esteem, overshadows the other principles of universality (respect) and care (love).

Interestingly enough, it becomes unclear in such moments whether the young men are searching for love, respect, or esteem. Theoretically, this implies there is a blurring of Honneth's tripartite classification of recognition. When showing off about how loved they are, the young men search for love, but also for esteem, in the sense that they try to distinguish themselves from, and be better than, others. When emphasising how smart and independent they are, they search for respect, but again, also for esteem. Love and respect are turned into forms of recognition that have a structure similar to esteem — where you have winners and losers who are judged on the basis of their individual achievements and contributions.

Empirically, it seems that the previously identified atomising discourse of participation profoundly enters co-workers' search for recognition. They are mainly looking for ways in which they can excel individually, have more, or be better than somebody else. However, when recalling policymakers and professionals who envision such excellence on the basis of work-related (productive and self-steering) achievements, what stands out is that co-workers have a much broader and creative understanding of excellence. Plenty of other activities and characteristics are invoked to obtain a special status or distinct position at the sheltered workshop, e.g. being a potent and dominant man, a loyal friend, acting smart, or being independent.

Working alone, acting tough, caring together

What do situations of recognition actually look like at the Dutch sheltered workshops? Where and how did I notice young men experience recognition? I hold that this question requires more than the mere combination of the previously discussed elements (ideas about 'good' participation, professional practices, and young men's understandings of, and search for, recognition). It also requires attending to immediate situations and interactions between people, for example by paying attention to bodies and emotions. Chapter 7 meticulously describes situations at the sheltered workshops in terms of bodily activities and emotions, with the aim of evocatively recalling co-workers' experiences of recognition.

A first situation shows Dylan — a co-worker who has a driving license — delivering food to residential clients by car. On his round, he receives compliments and gratitude from multiple people. He gets a special status, and communicates he is the 'boss' of the delivery service. Dylan is allowed to do what both he and other co-workers perceive as 'real', independent, urgent work. His experience of recognition emerges from standing out from the crowd of co-workers who do not have special (work) skills (like a driving license). What Dylan feels recognised for are his individual work achievements and his

position as the 'best' or most 'talented' worker at the sheltered workshop more generally.

This kind of recognition is actively encouraged by policy and professionals (and desired by co-workers too), but is reserved for the few, like Dylan, who best mimic 'normal' workers in terms of self-management and productivity — characteristics that are favoured in the regular labour market and, by extension, in the sheltered workshops too. For the others, there are hardly any serious work tasks on offer. They feel drained, bored, and frustrated.

However, far from being completely deprived of recognition, co-workers repeatedly find recognition through participating at work in ways that are not fostered by policy and by the dominant professional role. A detailed description of emotions and bodies in a streetwise, bullying situation leads to identifying a second empirical form of recognition. It resembles Dylan's experience of recognition in the sense that it too is based on living up to atomising ideals of excelling, competing, and outshining others, only this time not through work achievements, but through acting streetwise. Both situations are instances of what I call 'Top Dog recognition': who or what is recognised is the best and most talented individual in any kind of endeavour.

More sporadically, co-workers engage in situations that generate a form of recognition that I refer to as 'Team Player recognition'. In these situations, (humble) contributions to the group, or to members of the group, become the basis for recognition. Feelings of recognition are not generated because one outdoes others, but because one becomes part of a group. In this regard, a first situation describes the dismantling of a greenhouse, and the very corporeal generation of Team Player recognition for the workers involved, including myself. Team Player recognition could be obtained via shared work, but also through other things: for example, through jointly caring for a fellow colleague's daily insulin injection.

Yet, the strong atomising discourse of participation, and Directors' active discouragement of togetherness, marginalised situations of Team Player recognition at the Dutch sheltered workshops.

Sharing success and sanctions

In the Dutch context described above, the discourse of participation is predominantly atomising, and it fundamentally shapes co-workers' experiences of recognition. In Chapter 8, the contrasting case of Portugal shows that participation could also be put into practice in a less atomising, more 'communalising' way.

In terms of professional roles, I show in Chapter 8 that not the (consonant) Director, but the (dissonant) Teacher appears most dominant. In addition, a

fourth professional role, that of the Parent, emerges. The Parent actively teaches co-workers how to behave and relate to others, as colleagues and as human beings more generally. The Parent is emotionally close to his co-workers, or at times even intrusive. The atmosphere is affectionate, but also hierarchical.

With the Teacher and the Parent as dominant roles, the *team* is the most important unit, as opposed to the *individual* in the Dutch sheltered workshops. Co-workers are held responsible as a group for fulfilling tasks that professionals assign to them. Working together is framed as benefitting everyone because people can complement each other. When co-workers do their work well, they share the success, but when they do not, they also share the sanctions. The discourse of participation takes the form of what can be termed a 'communalising' discourse: participation at work is interpreted and strived for by developing workers' social and relational skills in an affective, yet hierarchical, work-environment. Under such a discourse, what happens to experiences of recognition?

Descriptions of concrete situations at the Portuguese workshops show that, under a communalising discourse of participation, co-workers predominantly long for, and experience, Team Player recognition: who or what is recognised is the 'caring worker', who looks after his colleagues, and shows concern and attention during particular work tasks. As previously argued, discourses of participation shape what becomes possible in terms of experiences and interactions of recognition. The Portuguese case strengthens and refines this argument.

In contrast to their Dutch counterparts, the Portuguese workers seem better prepared for a labour market that is, despite all policy measures, not very welcoming to people who are low-skilled and who do not perform well in terms of productivity and self-management. At the sheltered workshop, they are taught that they will have to obey and make big efforts in order to be valued for their work contributions, but also that they can compensate with social and relational skills. However, the combination of affection and hierarchy, of being for others instead of (only) for oneself, also entails some risks. The Portuguese co-workers are disciplined into subservient and docile workers who get little chance of ever transcending their position as low-skilled workers.

The ambivalence of recognition

Welfare arrangements and work institutions are not morally neutral: they have strong views on what are recognisable ways of participating and what are not. In this dissertation, I have explored the relation between these discourses of participation and the experiences of recognition of, in this case, young men working in sheltered workshops.

Under the atomising discourse of participation that was found to be dominant at the Dutch sheltered workshops, it was expected that co-workers would feel valued for being hard workers, for working independently, being skilled, taking initiative, and excelling in a particular task. This form of recognition was referred to as 'Top Dog recognition', signalling the emphasis on merit, achievements, and individual dominance over others. Despite many efforts from professionals, under current labour market conditions, Top Dog recognition *via work achievements* was unattainable for the majority of co-workers. Instead, Top Dog recognition *via streetwise achievements* burgeoned. These findings highlight how harmful it is to promise esteem to co-workers and convince them that their individual work achievements can be unique and valuable, when daily experiences tell them they are not.

The contrasting case of Portuguese sheltered workshops showed a different picture. While a similar atomising discourse of participation was at play in national policies, it was put into practice very differently, and amounted to what was described as a communalising discourse. Under such a discourse, co-workers regularly produced and experienced moments of Team Player recognition. Team Player recognition occurred sporadically at the Dutch workshops too, but was actively foreclosed by an atomising discourse of participation and its dominant professional role. Reflecting on these findings, what can they teach us regarding theory on the one hand, and policy on the other hand?

In Chapter 9, I set out the main implications of the research. Theoretically, the research contributes to the 'sociologisation' of recognition, and does so in three ways. First, it suggests paying attention to bodies and collective achievements (which are largely absent from theories of recognition) as a way of amplifying and concretising a fundamental condition of recognition, namely its 'intersubjectivity'. Recognition involves physical elements, and can be produced through practical and bodily engagements with others and with the world.

Second, a relational approach to recognition is advocated, one that combines institutions and interactions by looking at how they work together in shaping recognisable subjects and activities. Such an approach combines Honneth's focus on interactions with Fraser's focus on institutions by examining how institutionalised patterns of value transform co-workers into subjects with very particular self-stories, aspirations, and ways of searching for recognition. Comparing the findings from Dutch sheltered workshops with those from the Portuguese strengthens this argument: co-workers hold different expectations and experience other forms of recognition in different institutional contexts.

Third, the thesis suggests that misrecognition is enfolded in different ways, and to varying degrees, in various empirical forms of recognition. A call is

made to take situations that give rise to less perfect forms of recognition seriously, namely those that are skewed, involving only peers, or that are based on excluding and even hurting others, like the streetwise kind that was recurrent at the Dutch sheltered workshops. Such forms of recognition lead us to compromise recognition's perfectionist character, acknowledge its unequalising mechanisms, and study its ambivalence.

Empirically, the study suggests that the role of the Team Player needs to be revalued in sheltered workshops, in the labour market, and in society more generally. To start, Dutch sheltered workshops should include active work on, and facilitation of, internal relations. Being a part of the whole, or devoting oneself to helping another person, need to be fostered as additional sources of participation (and hence, recognition). In reference to the title of this book, I suggest that 'when doing your best is not good enough, let us do it together'.

On the level of the labour market, extra jobs need to be created and made available to *all people*, including co-workers like the young men in this research who are currently considered too expensive to work in a regular work environment. This would require the creation and allocation of jobs that are not guided by principles of productivity and self-management, but by principles of well-being, recognition, and human rights. Having a job with decent conditions and a decent wage become basic rights in this stream of thought.

Finally, on the level of society, revaluing the Team Player can provide a counterbalance to the emphasis on merit that pervades society as a whole, and that affects all of us. Co-workers' situation serves as a magnifying glass here: it highlights how an achievement-principle invades other spheres of life more generally. Recognition is an unstable business in general, but becomes even more so when it comes to depend on principles of personal merit and competition. Paying attention to, and valuing moments of, group-work and care-work ('Team Player') in which one cannot really compete or excel, could provide a counterweight to this dynamic. It would free all of us from the burden of constantly wanting and needing to do better than others or better than we can. It would remind us that doing our best is already good enough.