Recognition
Key Concepts series

Barbara Adam, *Time*
Alan Aldridge, *Consumption*
Alan Aldridge, *The Market*
Jakob Arnoldi, *Risk*
Colin Barnes and Geof Mercer, *Disability*
Darin Barney, *The Network Society*
Mildred Blaxter, *Health 2nd edition*
Harriet Bradley, *Gender 2nd edition*
Harry Brighouse, *Justice*
Mónica Brito Vieira and David Runciman, *Representation*
Steve Bruce, *Fundamentalism 2nd edition*
Joan Busfield, *Mental Illness*
Margaret Canovan, *The People*
Andrew Jason Cohen, *Toleration*
Alejandro Colás, *Empire*
Mary Daly, *Welfare*
Anthony Elliott, *Concepts of the Self 3rd edition*
Steve Fenton, *Ethnicity 2nd edition*
Katrin Flikschuh, *Freedom*
Michael Freeman, *Human Rights 2nd edition*
Russell Hardin, *Trust*
Geoffrey Ingham, *Capitalism*
Fred Inglis, *Culture*
Robert H. Jackson, *Sovereignty*
Jennifer Jackson Preece, *Minority Rights*
Gill Jones, *Youth*
Paul Kelly, *Liberalism*
Anne Mette Kjær, *Governance*
Ruth Lister, *Poverty*
Jon Mandle, *Global Justice*
Cillian McBride, *Recognition*
Anthony Payne and Nicola Phillips, *Development*
Judith Phillips, *Care*
Chris Phillipson, *Ageing*
Michael Saward, *Democracy*
John Scott, *Power*
Timothy J. Sinclair, *Global Governance*
Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism 2nd edition*
Deborah Stevenson, *The City*
Leslie Paul Thiele, *Sustainability*
Steven Peter Vallas, *Work*
Stuart White, *Equality*
RECOGNITION

Cillian McBride
## Contents

*Acknowledgements* vii

**Introduction**

1 The Politics of Recognition 9

2 Respect 42

3 Esteem and Social Distinction 72

4 Justice and Recognition 103

5 The Struggle for Recognition 134

*Notes* 164

*References* 171

*Index* 180
For my parents
This short book has been a long time in preparation and I have incurred many intellectual debts along the way. I should particularly like to thank Jonathan Seglow, Jurgen De Wispelaere, John Garry, Simon Thompson, Patrick Leonard, Arto Laitinen, Peter Jones, John Horton, Maeve Cooke and Christopher Cowley, Rowan Cruft and the Northern Political Theory Association, Iseult Honohan, Andy Shorten and the Political Theory Network, Ireland; the participants in the Political Theory Doctoral Workshop here at Queen’s, especially Paddy McQueen, Fabian Schuppert, Philip O’Hanlon, Gavin Kerr, and Onni Hirvonen. Also, Andrea Baumeister, Monica Mookherjee, and Mike Kenny who, along with Jonathan Seglow and Simon Thompson, organized seminars in the ESRC seminar series on The Politics of Recognition and the Dynamics of Social Conflict, and Shane O’Neill, with whom I coordinated the series. Paddy McQueen was kind enough to read and comment on the manuscript, as did Keith Breen, who was of great help in prompting me to straighten out many of the arguments. I am tremendously grateful to Alan Montefiore for introducing me to many of the themes discussed here. Emma Hutchinson at Polity has been a wonderfully patient editor. Living in Northern Ireland (and north Belfast in particular), it would be hard not to think about the ways in which struggles for respect and esteem play out in the world beyond the seminar room. Thanks to my friends

Acknowledgements
in the Families in the Waterworks Fishing Club, David Murphy, David Nixon, and everyone at the Duncairn Community Centre, for taking the time to talk to me about some of these ideas. Lisa Smyth has discussed every detail of the argument with me: I could not have worked out my thoughts on these issues without her. Ruadhán deserves a special mention for putting up with all this recognition talk.
Introduction

Everyone cares about recognition. This claim may strike some as a little odd: does everyone really crave the praise and admiration of others? Surely only the shallow and insecure care deeply about such things? Such people, we might think, exhibit the worst features of our ‘celebrity culture’ in which, it is said, the desire for fame has crowded out a concern with real achievement. We might well prefer to see ourselves as standing aloof from all this shallowness and superficiality. We do not crave recognition, rather we are independent and self-contained. Or is it simply that we want to be recognized as independent and self-contained?\(^1\) It is impossible to understand our world and our place in it without a clearer understanding of the nature of recognition and the reasons for our sensitivity to it.

The desire for recognition takes many forms and the relations between them are complex. On the one hand, it is a long-standing feature of our ideas about recognition that we should not be seen to care too deeply for some forms of recognition – praise and esteem, for example. On the other hand, however, we can understand why some are willing to sacrifice their lives for other forms of recognition, such as that of basic human dignity. In this case, to surrender our claim to basic respect would be tantamount to surrendering our moral standing, the value of which may outweigh the value of continued existence. Sometimes these different modes of
recognition may threaten to come into conflict with one another. Our desire to distinguish ourselves as special and unique may threaten to undermine our commitment to respecting others as equals. We may have to struggle to be recognized in the ways we think justified, but it can be difficult to determine what counts as appropriate recognition, especially when our own sense of self-respect and self-esteem is at odds with the degree of respect and esteem which others have for us.

There are two distinct currents in debates about social recognition, one concerned with the ‘politics of recognition’, and one offering a more philosophical account of the role that social recognition plays in helping us to become agents. The first of these strands connects the desire for social recognition to the politics of multiculturalism, taking its lead from Charles Taylor’s (1994) account of the way that marginalized groups can be harmed by the misrecognition of the wider society. Cultural minorities, so the argument goes, are not only disadvantaged with respect to access to resources like wealth, income, and power, they also suffer from a lack of recognition of the value of their particular identities and traditions. The appropriate response to this symbolic violence is some form of ‘public’ recognition of particular identities, which goes beyond the recognition of the sort of equal rights insisted upon in traditional forms of liberal egalitarian politics (Galeotti 2002).

The second strand of the recognition literature has its origins in the Critical Theory tradition, and it is relatively unconcerned with the politics of multiculturalism. Indeed, the leading thinker in this tradition, Axel Honneth, is quite critical of Taylor’s emphasis on cultural recognition (2003a: 163). Like Taylor, Honneth regards the lack of recognition as a serious ethical problem, but his approach follows two tracks. On the one hand, he ties recognition to a philosophical account of the conditions under which individuals develop their capacities for self-determination and self-realization, while on the other hand, he offers a social theory of modernity which interprets the modern world as the product of a series of struggles for recognition (Honneth 1995). Honneth argues that our relationship to ourselves is determined by our wider social relationships: our capacity to develop positive
relations towards ourselves such as self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem is determined by the degree of love, respect, and esteem we receive from others (Honneth 1992; 1995). Honneth suggests that Habermas’ theory of communicative action and discourse ethics is too abstract and formal: a critical social theory aimed at diagnosing society’s ills should start instead with the concrete experiences of humiliation and disrespect which can undermine individuals’ self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem, and consequently, their capacity for freedom (2007b: 71–2). The desire to secure the appropriate recognition, whether in the form of equal rights, or in the form of social esteem for one’s contribution to society, lies at the heart of many social conflicts in Honneth’s view, in contrast to the old Marxist understanding of social conflict in terms of class interests (1995: 148).

Taylor (1994: 51) is sharply critical of the pre-eminence of recognition as respect for universal human dignity in rights-based theories, seeing it as a hindrance to the recognition of the value of cultural diversity, although he does not argue that we must abandon our concern with this form of recognition (1994: 52). Honneth, by contrast, offers a more harmonious picture of the relationship between universal ‘respect’ and particular ‘esteem’, seeing each of these modes, together with ‘love’, as necessary to the formation of a successful identity. Both Taylor and Honneth are inspired, however, by a shared commitment to Hegel’s vision of human beings as essentially social creatures, whose capacity for freedom is inextricably linked to the norms and institutions of their particular communities. The multicultural and Critical Theory approaches to recognition are opposed to the sort of ‘atomist’ understanding of the relationship between individuals and society associated with certain forms of liberalism, or libertarianism. Taylor and Honneth share the view that a traditional liberal politics of equal rights is insufficient to maintain the sort of solidarity which a liberal society requires. To remedy this we must turn to richer forms of recognition. Taylor thinks this requires greater openness to the value of cultural diversity, while Honneth (1995: 171–7) stresses the need to supplement the rights embodied in legal norms with a form of social solidarity that includes recognition of the value of everyone’s particular contribution to society. In
different ways, then, each attributes to social recognition a key role in making possible the ideal of an ethical community in which everyone is, somehow, recognized appropriately (Taylor 1979; Honneth 1995: 2010).

I find the underlying vision here of human beings as social beings working out their understanding of themselves through dialogue with others compelling. Both Taylor and Honneth subscribe to an essentially social understanding of the conditions of human freedom, and this aspect of the Hegelian heritage remains attractive, even if other, central, planks of his philosophical system must be abandoned (Honneth 2010). Hegel is, however, famous for his critique of Kantian morality’s overly abstract account of the moral agent, detached from any social context and guided by a hopelessly formal commitment to universal moral principles. I should lay my cards on the table now: I am not persuaded by this critique of the sort of Kantian moral outlook that informs many liberal egalitarian theories of social justice and democratic politics (Rawls 1999, 1993; Scanlon 1982; Barry 1995). An underlying assumption of this book is that it is possible, however, to combine this sort of moral outlook with the more Hegelian vision of ourselves as social actors central to the recognition literature.

There is not space to argue this in this short book, but in Chapter 2 I touch on the affinities between contractualism and the idea of respect recognition in particular. One consequence of this view is that I believe that the existing literature on recognition does not offer us an adequate account of what justice requires of us with respect to recognition claims. The relationship between recognition and social justice is explored in Chapter 4. A second consequence of this, I think, is that neither strand of the recognition literature gives sufficient weight to individual agency in the struggle for recognition; that is, our role in managing our desires for recognition, and in deliberating about the authority of the recognition claims made upon us. In the concluding chapter, then, I outline an ‘interactive’ account of recognition that puts the agent at the centre of the struggle for recognition, and I suggest, in the discussions of respect and esteem in Chapters 2 and 3, that we are always, to some extent, independent of particular manifestations of social recognition and misrecognition.
This ‘interactive’ account of recognition stresses the link between social norms, individual agency, and our sensitivity to recognition of others. This sensitivity is part of the mechanism which helps us to orient ourselves in the social world. Our lives, on this view, are guided by largely unwritten social norms which prescribe the sorts of behaviour appropriate in a given situation. We are guided not determined, however, for the norms themselves are always open to interpretation, and, in our modern world, often make conflicting claims upon us, pulling us in different directions. The social recognition we enjoy will be shaped by the way that we respond to the normative demands made upon us.

In practice we may find that our responses meet with a mixed reception, earning us the esteem of some, while losing us the esteem of others. We may find, too, that our self-respect can prompt us to reject some expressions of social esteem (Appiah 2010). While we are social animals, then, we are also individual agents who must try to make sense of the demands the various social, moral, and legal norms make upon us and who have considerable freedom to judge which of these claims to endorse and which to reject. To say that we are sensitive to social recognition is not to imply that we are simply slaves to it. Instead, we should see our recognition-sensitivity as an essential feature of our individual agency; that is, as part of the machinery of recognizing and assessing the normative demands made upon us by the social world.

Sometimes we compete for the positive esteem of others, but there are circumstances in which negative social esteem assures us that we are on the right track. We may want to provoke unease or anger on the part of others because we reject their claims upon us and want them to recognize that we are rejecting their authority to make these demands on us. This sort of struggle for recognition, whether it involves teenagers upsetting their parents with their clothes, haircuts, and music, women seeking to upset engrained patriarchal social norms, or gay and lesbian citizens demanding the right to live their lives in the open, is a central feature of both personal, and social and political conflicts. The exercise of our freedom in a social world that makes all manner of normative demands upon us will give rise to complex, sometimes antagonistic, relations of recognition and misrecognition.
This aspect of the struggle for recognition, the struggle for authority, is not, I think, as widely appreciated in the literature on the ethics and politics of recognition as it should be.

Our thinking about the ethics and politics of recognition has been decisively shaped by what we could call the ‘recognition deficit’ model. The basic picture which has both multicultural and Critical Theory discussions of recognition in its grip is that of a relationship between someone who lacks recognition, claiming it from another who has the power to remedy this recognition deficit by granting the recognition which is sought. The focus is, typically, on the harms done by the lack of recognition, and the solution is, consequently, thought to be more recognition. We should strive for a society in which recognition deficits are, if not entirely overcome, at least minimized. I don’t want to say that this is wholly mistaken, only that this model does not do justice to the complexity of our struggles for recognition.

Firstly, it offers a seriously truncated snapshot of relations of recognition. In particular, it diverts our attention away from questions of power and authority. The assumption is that the most urgent problem is that recognition claims often, and wrongly, go unmet. As I suggest in Chapter 1, however, there is also a question about the way our desires for recognition from particular groups, individuals, and institutions are formed in the first place. In seeking recognition from a particular quarter, I am already recognizing their authority over me, and sometimes this is a greater problem than the lack of recognition. We should be more aware of the possibility that our desire for recognition can itself be a product of social domination. In some cases, then, particularly, I would suggest, those of cultural minorities, the pursuit of freedom and equality may be advanced rather by freeing ourselves altogether of the desire for the recognition of those to whom we are subordinate. To understand this, we need to think of recognition in terms of a struggle for normative authority (Pinkard 1994), rather than in terms of a psychological need.

Secondly, and closely related to this, the recognition-deficit model presents us primarily as passive recipients of social recognition. However, if we understand recognition in terms of a struggle for normative authority, it is clear that we are always agents who must endorse the authority claims of
others before their recognition is of any value to us. While there are tremendous social pressures upon us to accept the authority of dominant norms, and those who represent them – parents, teachers, politicians, clerics, ‘business leaders’, and so on – it is, in principle, possible to resist these claims, and to value alternative sources of recognition. Indeed, when we are faced with competing claims, we may have no choice but to exercise our agency in deliberating about which claims we ought to endorse.

In focusing on the recognition claimant and their lack of recognition, there is a risk that our attention is diverted from those who claim the authority to dispense recognition: those who have the power to block our access to respect by denying legal equality, or whose social dominance positions them as the authorities whose esteem we must strive to earn. The deficit model’s focus on the recognition supplicant can distract us from addressing the pressing problem that some simply enjoy too much recognition and use their social prestige as a resource to secure their dominance. Dazzled by ‘difference’, perhaps, there is a surprising failure in the recognition literature to come to terms with the connection between recognition and the processes of social distinction which sustain social inequalities. In Chapter 3 I try to correct this imbalance by drawing attention to the rich tradition of sociological thought concerned with status hierarchies and social distinction. An adequate moral and political theory of recognition cannot afford to overlook the dark side of recognition and the thorny problem of the way that the pursuit of distinction can work against the pursuit of social equality.

To sum up, then, I have reservations about the way that debates about recognition have been too closely associated with multiculturalism, and too insulated from questions about social distinction and social stratification. There is also, clearly, a substantive difference between the sort of weak perfectionist ethical outlook shared by Taylor and Honneth, which gives priority to ethical questions about the good life, and my own, more justice-focused, outlook. While Taylor and Honneth are typically concerned to ‘correct’ or supplement the undoubted narrowness of the focus on moral rights and wrongs which characterizes normative moral and political philosophy (Honneth 1995: 172), my worry is that this
contributes to a tendency to skirt difficult questions about justice in relation to recognition, and to an overly conflict-free understanding of the role of recognition in our lives.

I share, however, their sense that we need to think about moral agency in more concrete, situated ways, and that an understanding of social recognition is essential to this, but I am more inclined to see our social situation as a source of competing claims and moral dilemmas. The struggle for recognition is, in any case, a central feature of our lives, from our personal relations, through to our interaction with social and political institutions. We cannot make sense of social conflicts, and the way our embeddedness in the social world gives rise to moral and ethical dilemmas, without understanding the way that our sensitivity to recognition orients us in the world.
For many Anglo-American political theorists, the ‘politics of recognition’ is virtually synonymous with multiculturalism and Charles Taylor’s essay on the ‘politics of recognition’ is perhaps the most influential account of this politics. It is striking that even those who set their faces against the ‘politics of recognition’ nonetheless appear to accept Taylor’s view of the nature of recognition and the sort of claims involved, while rejecting his conclusions (Fraser 2003a). As Taylor sees it, the common thread connecting a range of political struggles since the 1970s, particularly those of feminism, anti-racism, and the struggles of ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples – ‘subaltern’ groups of various sorts – is the demand for ‘recognition’ (Taylor 1994: 25). The emergence of the ‘politics of recognition’ appears to mark a break with the sort of class politics which dominated much of the twentieth century. Instead of demands for higher wages, the defence of the welfare state, and the regulation or nationalization of industry, the politics of recognition reflects a different set of concerns: with cultural diversity and the complexities of ‘identity’ – social, political, and personal. Feminism, which had engaged in a long struggle to work out the relationship between class and gender, provided one major strand in this politics, igniting the ‘identity politics’ of the 1980s which then flowered into a broader set of debates about the intersection of class, race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality (Hekman 1999).
Following a rather different trajectory, the debate between ‘liberals and communitarians’, centring on a confrontation between ‘atomist’ and ‘situated’ accounts of the self, deeply influenced emerging debates about the place of ethnic diversity in ‘multicultural’ societies (Mulhall and Swift 1996; Kymlicka 1989). Where the ‘liberal/communitarian’ debate had a rather abstract character to it, ‘multiculturalism’ effectively brought these ideas to bear on questions about ethnicity and cultural assimilation at a time when the fall of communism had reignited interest in ethnic and national differences. The politics of recognition assumes that we live in a world of diverse social and personal identities – a world of diversity which is not going to be eliminated by any ‘inexorable’ process of modernization and homogenization, or by some act of revolutionary emancipation. If cultural diversity is a permanent feature of the human condition, then we need to rethink our responses to this diversity, and, it is argued, re-evaluate the way we think about the pursuit of equality and the model of progressive politics inherited from the Enlightenment.

Two models of the self: Choice and dialogue

Taylor’s argument has several strands. Firstly, he is concerned to reject ‘atomist’ understandings of the self and to replace them with an understanding of the self as an ‘intersubjective’ or ‘dialogical’ construction (Taylor 1985). Secondly, he offers an interpretation of the ‘politics of recognition’ as a new current within egalitarian politics (he does not simply contrast ‘equality’ and ‘difference’) in tension with the traditional politics of ‘universal respect’. Thirdly, he advances an argument for ‘recognizing’ cultural diversity and the desire of cultural groups to preserve their particular language and cultural identity.

The atomist vision of the self is a familiar one: the self is self-contained and self-interested, and social relations are to be explained in terms of the way that they advance the interests of those involved in them. On this view, which receives its canonical statement in Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, we are all competitive, self-interested individuals who only enter into society and accept its demands to the extent that it serves our