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Recognition, Reification, and Practices of Forgetting: Ethical Implications of Human Resource Management

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Abstract This article examines the ethical framing of employment in contemporary human resource management (HRM). Using Axel Honneth's theory of recognition and classical critical notions of reification, I contrast recognition and reifying stances on labor. The recognition approach embeds work in its emotive and social particularity, positively affirming the basic dignity of social actors. Reifying views, by contrast, exhibit a forgetfulness of recognition, removing action from its existential and social moorings, and imagining workers as bundles of discrete resources or capacities. After discussing why reification is a problem, I stress that recognition and reification embody different ethical standpoints with regards to organizational practices. Thus, I argue paradoxically that many current HRM best practices can be maintained while cultivating an attitude of recognition. If reification is a type of forgetting, cultivating a recognition attitude involves processes of "remembering" to foster work relations that reinforce employee dignity.

Keywords Human resources · Recognition · Dignity · Frankfurt School · Critical theory · Reification

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Introduction

The rapid growth of Human Resource Management (HRM) has involved attempts to frame HRM's role in understanding the human consequences of the contemporary world of work (Heery 2008). Such attempts have generated discussions around the ethics of HRM (Pinnington et al. 2007), varying from principled and "purist" perspectives drawn from moral theory and philosophy (Rowan 2000) to more "user-friendly" approaches that mix ethical-theoretical foundations and formulate managerial guidelines for practice (Winstanley and Woodall 2000; Heery 2008). More recent approaches to HRM have begun to emerge from critical theory, focusing on ideological and exploitative aspects of HRM, and challenging mainstream approaches to ethics by combining a practice-based approach with a critical lens (Greenwood 2002).

The growing importance of critical ethical approaches brings with it an increased focus on "macro" critiques of HRM (Townley 1993; Islam and Zyphur 2008), calling into question the ethical grounding of the field in general (Greenwood 2002). While traditional views frame human resources as costs to be minimized or resources to be deployed strategically, critical ethical views highlight the potentially problematic idea of "using" people (Greenwood 2002), inherent in such framings. In Simon's (1951) seminal work, the employee is defined as one who "permits his behavior to be guided by a decision reached by another, irrespective of his own judgment as to the merits of that decision" (p. 21), a characterization that seems to deprive humans of basic freedoms of conscience. While such authors do not discuss this aspect of employment relations as inherently problematic, some ethics scholars questioned the ethicality of contemporary workplace relationships (Nussbaum 2006) as well as HRM (e.g., Pless and Maak

2004), as reducing human beings to material or financial resources and thus depriving them of their relational or other essential aspects.

To be sure, HRM focuses on "human capital" within organizations (Foss 2008; van Marrewijk and Timmers 2003) to enhance organizational productivity, framing individuals as means to organizational ends. Selection processes focus on job-specific individual and team knowledge, skills, and abilities (grouped together in the general "knowledge, skills, and abilities" or "KSAs"; Guion 1998), training and development practices focus on firm-specific competencies and relational habits that are difficult to copy (van Marrewijk and Timmers 2003), and psychological contracts in firms tend to be increasingly transactional, focusing on short-term market exchanges (Rousseau 1995). That human agency is treated in an "instrumental" fashion by such features of HRM could have implications for the basic dignity of workers (Sayer 2007). It would be problematic if *all* instrumentality constituted a breach of dignity; however, because such a strict ethical criterion might invalidate any goal-directed behavior. We thus need to explore the conditions under which treating work instrumentally diminishes human dignity, and in what ways instrumentality might be consistent with dignity. Ideally, such an examination would attempt to outline how instrumental action can be best reconciled with views that recognize the full social worth of human beings.

This article uses a recognition-theoretic view (Honneth 1995a) to provide a conceptual undergirding for a critical ethical examination of HRM, employing Honneth's (2008a) reformulation of the notion of *reification* to explore how reifying views of work can undermine workers' ability to grasp the moral weight of their actions. Following Honneth (2008a), reifying work is not immoral in terms of an external moral standard, but rather as a *misrecognition* of those forms of sociality that make organized work possible in the first place. As a proponent of the fundamental value of work within a well-lived life, Honneth provides an ideal basis for a critical ethics perspective in HRM. Building on earlier discussions of reification (Lukacs 1971), contemporary HRM can be critiqued, not for valuing the wrong things, but for misrepresenting the value bases underlying work systems, a distinction that will carry practical implications.

The remainder of this article unfolds as follows: after briefly summarizing a recognition-theoretic view of work, I overview the notion of reification, discussing how employees become reified through HRM practices. I then discuss reification as a problem of recognition, using recognition theory as a normative compass with which to critique work practices that reflect a "forgetfulness of recognition." Next, I discuss the possibility of a non-reifying HRM approach, engaging in instrumental action

while avoiding reification. Finally, I respond to limitations of the recognition-theoretic view, outlining areas for future development.

Recognition and the Ethics of Work

The recognition-theoretic perspective begins with the idea that human self-esteem and dignity are constituted intersubjectively through participation in forms of social life, including working life and political and social participation (Honneth 1995a). Participation, in recognition theory, always involves an implicit, basic positive or affirmative social gesture, a standpoint of interpersonal recognition. By recognition, Honneth (2008a; Honneth and Margalit 2001) suggests a pre-cognitive affirmation of the social-affective bond between members of a society. In other words, before "cognizing" the identities, traits and preferences of a person, we have to "recognize" their status as autonomous and agentic. Recognition, according to Honneth (2008a) underlies all forms of sociality, even those that, as we will see, he terms reifying. The latter, he claims, are pathologies of misrecognition, and involve "forgotten" or repressed recognition.

The notion of intersubjective recognition, key to Honneth's theory, developed from an elaboration and extension of Hegel's early Jena writings (Honneth 1995a, b), which explored the philosophical roots of Hobbes' social contract theory. To Hegel, social relations could not be solely based on contractual/legal forms of sociability, because the mutual recognition of legal rights already presupposed a more primitive form of recognition, namely, the acknowledgement that others are similar to oneself in having needs and vulnerabilities. The universalization and articulation of this notion of the "concrete" individual gives rise to an "institutionalized recognition order" (Fraser and Honneth 2003) establishing the idea of a formalized legal person with rights (Honneth 1995a, b). This general right-bearing person, further, strives to become an "I" or subject, standing against the community from which his/her personhood arose to critically evaluate and seek esteem as a productive individual (Honneth 1995a, b). In a dialectic progression between different "recognition orders," the affective concrete individual thus becomes a formal legal entity, then attempts to express his/her individuality and gain esteem through forms of work. Work therefore represents an advanced stage of identity consolidation that, following upon a foundation of universal rights and intersubjective care, is a key aspect of an ethical (i.e., well-lived, flourishing) life.

Without pursuing the Hegelian roots of recognition theory further, we see that formalized contractual relations (such as an employment contract) presume a conception of

individuals as worthy of concern and acknowledgment. In turn, these relations lay the foundation for individuals' attempts to seek esteem and merit from within a community of civic relations. Thus, recognition takes the varied forms of concern, rights, and esteem, with each form tending toward the next.

For Honneth (2008a), these different forms of recognition all involve positive affirmations of one's fellow human beings. "Positive," however, does not refer to positive emotions toward the person or support for their behavior (Honneth 2008a). It is rather an acknowledgment that peoples' agency must be reckoned with as participants in society, that individuals be seen first and foremost as beings with subjectivity and a point of view (for a critique, see Butler 2008). Conversely, failing to acknowledge or recognize individuals leads to a state of invisibility or social alienation (Honneth and Margalit 2001). Applied to employee relations, recognition is thus different from attitudes like organizational identification, value alignment, or person-organization fit, and provides for a basis of solidarity while allowing for value conflicts. Rather than identification, Honneth and Margalit (2001) describe recognition as a kind of "motivational readiness" to engage others as moral actors whose states are worthy of articulation, irrespective of differences in values or identities.

Honneth views recognition as basic to social organization, as grounding personal autonomy and self-realization. However, he resists charges of instrumentalism or "functionalism," arguing that, rather than a cause of healthy social relations, recognition constitutes social relations per se. Recognition is not desirable because of its instrumental outcomes but because it grounds instrumental social relations themselves (Honneth 2002). This distinction is useful because, unlike utilitarian views of ethics, it does not frame ethics in terms of instrumental outcomes. More importantly, however, it does not *preclude* instrumental or functional social behavior (which would make it difficult to apply to most contemporary organizations), but affirms that instrumental behavior finds its ultimate ground in the self-realization of social actors made possible through recognition. This second aspect makes it ideal for studying work relations, by reconciling instrumentalist, interest-based and principled justice views (e.g., Greenwood 2002).

In addition, beyond its critical potential, recognition theory also rescues the work concept from overly cognitive conceptions of social interaction (Moll 2009). For example, Honneth's mentor, Habermas (e.g. 1981), locates ethicality in "communicative rationality," within the processes of intersubjective truth-finding, dissociating ethics from instrumental conceptions of action, which are directed toward functional aspects of society. Honneth (1995b), departing from this tradition, argues that Habermas had abandoned work as an ethical mode of being, and that instrumental action should

not be dismissed as irrelevant to the ethical sphere. Yet work, and instrumental action generally, can also promote habits of forgetting whereby we deny, repress, or misrecognize the ethical basis of our work (Honneth 2008a, 1995b). Neither "unethical" in the sense of breaking ethical codes (Wiley 2000) nor "erroneous" in the sense of making category mistakes (Honneth 2008a), such misrecognitions involve taking an inauthentic stance toward work, failing to understand what it is that one is actually doing while acting. In a similar way that for Habermas (1981), rational communication presupposes that one cares about, or has a stake in, the ability for people to reach consensus, for Honneth, coordinated social interaction presupposes that actors care about or have a stake in mutual acknowledgement.

Despite this presupposition, however, when work interactions are goal directed, we may neglect this underlying basis in interpersonal recognition, treating organizational goals as if they existed independently of human intentions and shared projects. This does not change the social nature of work, but may promote neglect of this aspect. Because the immediate object of work involves a product or service, the production of which is the explicit goal of a work system, the underlying social bases of the system may remain below consciousness, and risk being forgotten altogether. Although intersubjective recognition does not itself constitute an object of work, but rather a "grammar" (Honneth 1995a, b) of work, its underlying structuration of the work sphere provides a basis for collaboration and instrumental labor. Reification is the term Honneth (2008a) uses to describe the various processes that promote a misrecognition, forgetting or neglect of this underlying relation at work, and reification is thus a useful concept to discuss as a basis for HRM.

Human Resources and the Problem of Reification

While labor discussions have tended to frame issues of worker well-being in terms of economic welfare (Gill 1999), an ongoing debate within critical theory involves the extent to which systemic critique should involve primarily economic questions of material redistribution or symbolic issues of identity and values (Fraser 1995; Fraser and Honneth 2003). Honneth and coworker (2003) argues that the history of labor conflict is marked by struggles to defend "ways of life," not simply gain material benefits (c.f. Thompson 1924/1993), and thus understanding ethical worker relations must involve a recognition of work as part of an ethical human striving for a "good life." Recognition theory (Honneth 1995a, b) argues that such a good life involves the striving of actors to achieve work-related goals that are considered valuable in a community of relationships.

Because HRM specializes in the administration of human action, motivation, and relationships at work, it must contain an (implicit or explicit) concept of employee agency. According to Kallinikos (2003), "The consideration of the models of human agency, underlying the constitution of the workplace during the past 100 years or so, seems to be essential to the project of understanding the key behavioral premises of current economic and labor developments." (p. 596). The concept of reification (Lukacs 1971; Honneth 2008a; Berger and Pullberg 1966) contributes to the understanding of organizational life a particular vision of the relationship between human agents and the products of their labor. According to Lukacs (1971), the meaning people attribute to work depends on the relations they take with the objects of their labor, as well as their co-workers; these relationships shape not only the products of labor but the worker's ideas of themselves as well. Lukacs' (1971) formulation of the concept involved the modern essentializing of work, such that the products of contemporary labor practices appear as independent of the social processes by which they were constructed (Jay 2008). Obscuring the work processes underlying social products then made such products appear as fact-like, deterministic constraints on agents rather than as reflections of their own agency (Whyte 2003).

Applied to the world of employment relations, forms of sociality thus reified begin to look like duties and obligations, rather than as freely entered forms of social interaction. The facticity of social relations makes social actors appear as objects, either of duties and obligations, on the one hand, or as objects of manipulation and profit, on the other. Such objectification feeds back into the self-concepts of actors (Whyte 2003), and they begin to see themselves in fact-like terms, as bearers or owners of traits, exemplars of categories, and holders of human "capital" such as KSA's, rather than as free agents whose self-expression is realized in and through such traits and categories.

Following this logic, according to Honneth (2008a), reification has three progressive aspects for the subjects of commodity exchange. First, actors come to view their environments as composed of "objects" that serve as constraints or opportunities for commodity exchange. Second, they learn to view their fellow human beings as "objects" of economic transaction. Finally, they come to see themselves as "objects," defined by what they can offer to others in terms of commodity exchange and human capital. Each of these forms of reification is related to the others in that each decontextualizes its respective objects from their origins in networks of social recognition, viewing things, others, or themselves in isolated, disembedded terms (Berger and Pullberg 1966).

How do HRM practices fit into the reification story? Are there specific practices that are in themselves reifying,

or that force people into thing-like relations with each other? Honneth suggests that social practices can promote, but do not determine, reification, a point of view that attempts to engage in social critique without presenting a deterministic view of social circumstances. Rather, as emphasized by practice theorists (e.g., Feldman and Orlikowsky 2011), HRM practices can promote ways of thinking about work and simultaneously performatively constitute ways of being at work, by framing symbolic meanings and social relations. Following Honneth's direction, the proper question in this context would be more like "how do HRM practices promote environments in which reification appears as a normal, business-as-usual form of social existence?"

While an exhaustive review would be beyond this essay's scope, I will present three illustrative areas where HRM practices might constitute pathways to reification of employees. Such pathways range from more "micro" processes whereby employees essential features are defined through stable individual traits, to techniques that attempt to essentialize employees through metrics and incentives systems, to more "macro" trends in the workplace that decontextualize work from its social bases. I discuss each of these in turn.

"Human Capital" and the Reification of Employee Traits

Because reification involves seeing people in "thing-like" terms, treating their aspects as inert properties rather than as subjective expressions, we may point to organizational attempts to define people in terms of such properties as constituting a preliminary pathway to reification. Such attempts are characteristic of recent treatments of "human capital" (e.g., Foss 2008), which emphasize the organization of employment relations according to allocations and costs of human capital involved in production tasks. As Foss describes such views, "there is nothing particular about human capital; it is just a capital asset like any other which to be more or less specialized to specific uses and/or users" (Foss 2008, p. 8). Employees, as the "owners" of their own human capital, hold bargaining power to the extent that they hold specific job-related assets or capabilities that are hard to imitate (van Marrewijk and Timmers 2003), and the ability to act opportunistically to the extent that their contributions are not separable from other employees or monitorable (Williamson 1985). To this extent, HRM systems can increase managerial power by, on the one hand, finding ways to standardize employee human capital, and on the other hand, increase the separability of individual contributions through measurement and monitoring.

HRM practices contribute to a human capital view of work by providing the conceptual tools by which to

categorize work in terms of discrete, individualized worker capacities, or properties. Largely under the aegis of understanding differences in work behavior and productivity, as well as to develop effective selection systems, the search for stable, universal individual differences that relate to workplace performance has been a mainstay of HRM systems (e.g., McCrae and John 1992). Individual differences perspectives tend to frame human behavior as a product of developmental factors resulting from individuals' pre-existing potentials, often genetic in nature (Loehlin 1992), that are subject to change, although more from intrinsic developmental maturation than from cultural or social relationships.

Employees thus framed seem to possess capabilities that display a certain independence from the employee's own phenomenological lived experiences, intentions, or choices, and that can be traded, bargained, or otherwise instrumentally acted upon. Acquired skills are considered as job- or firm-specific human capital components that come with training or on-the-job experience (Foss 2008; Williamson 1975); this acquired knowledge constitutes a form of "asset specificity" (Williamson 1975), allowing employees to behave opportunistically. According to Foss (2008), the tying of incentives and benefits to job categories rather than individual negotiations, along with other work arrangements, reflect attempts to negotiate human capital across differentially specific and separable work situations. Training versus selection processes are essentially the outcomes of "make or buy" decisions, where the asset is human capital tied to the firm to the extent necessary to avoid opportunism. Stone (2002) describes how this view can lead to struggles over who "owns" worker knowledge, with not only ideas but also worker knowledge and experience, treated as a firm-specific asset that can be claimed from employees by firm owners.

In his essay on reification, Honneth (2008a) explicitly references psychometric testing of "talents" as promoting reification, particularly when such capacities are framed in genetic terms. The generalization of human capital as KSAs seems to abstract human inputs from their bases in the lived experiences of actors, and treat them as holders of bundles of capital inputs. Recognition views suggest that simply offering employee programs for skill or knowledge acquisition is not tantamount to recognition (Gutmann 1994), and some see a skill-based focus as exploitative (Borman 2009). In addition, Honneth (2003) has noted that an instrumental view of job skills can lead to a lack of recognition when such skills become disqualified from the market or outmoded. Thus, the reification of KSA's produces the difficult situation of being either used instrumentally for one's valuable skills, or else being seen obsolete or un-usable, neither of which constitutes a recognition of an employee's full humanity.

Measurement, Incentives, and the Reification of Employee Behavior

While not referring to organizational practices per se, Honneth (2008a) describes reification as promoted where "the mere observation of the other has become so much an end in itself that any consciousness of an antecedent social relationship disappears" (p 79). The habitual practice of monitoring and measuring is a fact of contemporary organizational life (Ball 2005), where measured behaviors and attitudes are used to create objectified categories, which are subsequently tied to economic outcomes based on the estimated economic value of these categories. Such practices seem like a recipe for promoting a reified stance toward people. As discussed above, the parsing of human behavioral tendencies into discrete and general categories (i.e., traits, skills, abilities) reduces work capabilities to standardizable functions rather than autonomous choices. In addition, the establishment of performance metrics increases the separability of individuals, allowing productivity to be individualized and evaluated for specific workers, neglecting the embeddedness of work practices with wider networks of social activity. Third, if organizational incentives are framed as compensation for lost time or effort rather than recognition of good works, then the goals of employee action cease to be seen as a form of inclusion in a socially valuable endeavor, and action is experienced as alienated from its actor.

Several scholars have directly or indirectly tied incentives practices to the reification phenomenon. Ball (2005), for example, discusses metrics in terms of the separation of the body as a social object from its phenomenological moorings as a site of lived experience. Holgrewe (2001) claims that incentives, bonuses, and other forms of "ritualized admiration" linked to performance measurement come to replace and attempt to compensate for a feeling of being recognized as a member of one organization, and the sense of belonging this entails. Carlon et al. (2006) argue that performance statistics can act as "fetishes," masking underlying social relations by treating such relations as facts, a concept closely related to the description of reification given above. Their analysis suggests that such metrics serve as signifiers that tend to break free from their original referents, taking on a life of their own.

As routinized measurements become dislocated from the lived human experiences from which they are drawn, recognition theory suggests they have harmful consequences for personal dignity. Diverse scholars have noted such effects; Sayer (2007), for example, points out that monitoring, because it frames actors solely as opportunistic economic actors, negatively affects their dignity. Lamont (2000) notes that worker dignity often results from the autonomy and trust an organization can show by not measuring worker output in economic terms.

Although Honneth's writings on recognition focus more on observation than incentive systems, the latter, because of their close relations to systems of measurement, gives rise to reifying standpoints. Sayer (2007) claims, for example, that dignity at work requires a certain temporal distance between action and reward, which facilitates reward as a recognition of general good performance rather than a specific transactional exchange. This falls in line with the self-determination per-spectives in which rewards seen as coercive diminish workers' sense of self-determination, but seen as a recognition of value or good performance, they reinforce self-determination and intrinsic motivation. According to Honneth (2003), recogni-tion of workers is possible through a "principle of achieve-ment," by which actors are recognized for their successes. Thus, it is not the incentives themselves that reify employees, but rather the framing of incentives as compensations of workers for their work (thus framing work as a loss) instead of as signals of recognition for their achievement.

The Contemporary Flexibilization of Work

While the within-organizational "micro" practices of HRM discussed above can promote reification, personnel changes associated with the changing workforce at the "macro" level also have implications for reification. Increasingly, scholars have noted increased workforce fragmentation, resulting from increases in temporary, contingent, or precarious forms of work (Kalleberg 2009), and the psychological costs associated with such changes (Deranty 2008). Such changes reflect large-scale shifts in the "psychological contracts" defining work relations, from relational contracts based on workplace inclusion to transactional contracts emphasizing spot transactions and economistic employee–organization relations (Rousseau 1995).

Because careers provide a source for narrative biograph-ical continuity, enabling a coherent identity (Levinson et al. 1978), fragmented employment forms "challenge the behavioral and existential unity" of employees (Kallinikos 2003, p. 600). By removing the temporal continuity from work relationships, temporary work arrangements disembed indviduals' work lives from their surroundings, making the individual the only constant, and thus obscuring the diffuse social connections from which those individuals draw their manners of thinking and acting. Kallinikos (2003) notes, for example, that contemporary forms of work promote the dislocalization of workers from sites of work and stable social relations. This is not to suggest that the workplace is the only or central space in which biographical continuity is achieved—worker identity can also be established through professional associations, craft guilds, and the like, and biographical continuity also rests on non-work bases such as the family or social ties—but it does suggest that the work-place is a key source for identity construction.

Such dislocations link the flexibilization and precariza-tion of work to reification. Some argue that the fragmentation of work life can lead to a sense of drift and social dislocation among individuals (Deranty 2008; Sennett 2006), promoting a view of humans as "depthless" (Jameson 1984) and "modular" (Gellner 1996). As some have noted (Bernstein 2006), the precarization of work de-couples skill acquisition from the social context of work, treating skills as a kind of "toolkit" employees carry from workspace to workspace. Given the relation of this toolkit view to a reified picture of human traits, it stands to reason that such a standpoint toward employees reflects reification.

In addition, precarious forms of work can reduce work-related solidarity and exacerbate ethnic and group-based divisions (Gill and Pratt 2008), divisions which are often reflective of reification (Honneth 2008a). Honneth argues that stereotyping, for example, is a problem of reification because it reflects a lack of recognition of the whole per-son, reducing people to single dimensions and denying their autonomy to transcend a group-based category. Chr-istopherson (2008) links gender and ethnic divisions to precarious work because, under precarious work relations, workers are forced to rely on their group-related resources, such as friendship networks, to secure work contracts, leading to the treatment of such networks as "capital," or the instrumentalization of social identities.

As said earlier, the three above areas of analysis are not meant to be exhaustive, nor do I argue that they invariably give rise to reification. Rather, similar to other recent approaches in critical theory, recognition theory focuses more on intersub-jective meaning than structural causation (Chari 2010), emphasizing the performative aspect of social practices in enacting status roles and demonstrating respect, an aspect that fits well with contemporary organizational practice perspec-tives (Ibarra-Colado et al. 2006; Feldman and Orlikowski 2001). Rather than a direct cause, then, reification promotes and embodies habits of thought by which HRM professionals' attention is diverted from the recognition of employee dignity and toward viewing employees as sources of individual and social capital.

At this point, however, one might ask "Even if reifica-tion is best thought of as a failure of recognition, and HRM practices can, in their various ways, promote such reifica-tion, why should this be a problem?" In other words, is reification morally wrong, or unethical? On what basis does exposing reification in HRM constitute a *critique* of HRM? I now turn to this topic.

Why is Reification a Problem? A Recognition View

To understand how reification constitutes a normative problem according to recognition theory, we must note the

peculiar line that this theory navigates between descriptive and normative perspectives. According to Honneth (2008a, p. 52), reification is "neither an epistemic category mistake nor…a transgression against moral principles." It is not the former because it does not make an erroneous assertion, but is a habit or perspective, but neither does it constitute an instance of "liability or guilt" (p 53), which would make it a moral transgression. This is perhaps the most difficult subtlety of Honneth's critique, and has drawn some criticism (e.g., Lear 2008). It is important, however, because it reflects the view that recognition is not a moral ideal or utopic vision, but a basic, pre-cognitive component of all social relations. In essence, Honneth argues that by living in society, we have *already tacitly agreed* to certain commitments, and thus undercut our own social existence and that of others when we fail to make good on these tacit commitments.

According to this view, which Honneth draws from diverse authors such as Dewey (1931), Heidegger (1962), and Cavell (1976), humans relate to each other neither as bundles of information (epistemic) nor as moral claimants (normative), but rather through a basis of acknowledgement and empathy. Just as our own feelings are to us neither simple "information" nor moral demands, but subjectively felt experiences, our primary relations with others are empathic experiences, a claim in support of which Honneth mobilizes evidence from developmental psychology as well as from philosophy. Misrecognition, typified by reification, is thus a kind of social pathology by which we forget the empathic basis of our relations, turning our attention to instrumental uses of other people.

Applied to HRM, I argued above that contemporary HRM approaches frame employees as bundles of objective capacities and "human capital," to be utilized, developed, or divested according to an economic logic. If one asks "why should people *not* be treated in such a way, given that people enter into contractual arrangements of their own free will?," the response would be that acknowledging employees' free autonomous will presupposes understanding them as more than simply human capital. Thus posed, such a response criticizes HRM internally, rather than imposing an arbitrary, "high philosophic" (Greenwood 2002, p. 265) framework on organizations that sounds moralistic and could estrange managers. Entering into a contract with an employee already presupposes the autonomy and basic dignity of both parties (Honneth 2008a, b, 1997). By subsequently reifiying employees, HRM "forgets" the implicit terms under which the employment contract is valid in the first place. The organization treats the employee *as if* (Honneth 2008b) they were mere instruments.

Thus, "we are left with the realization that reification has not eliminated the other, non-reified form of praxis but has merely concealed it from our awareness" (Honneth 2008a, p. 31). It is this concealment that leads Honneth to borrow Horkheimer and Adorno's (1999) celebrated phrase, "All reification is a forgetting."

Remembering Recognition

If reification is tantamount to a forgetfulness of the recognitive bases of human relations, striving for a normatively sound HRM approach is less a question of finding correct values than of "remembering" or attending to the values implicit in our social system, i.e., the unquestioned notions of civility that social actors expect from each other but are often left unexplicit in contractual terms or day-to-day work relations. The driving issue for HRM is thus how to promote employee capacity development without reducing human beings to bundles of capacities.

A recognition-theoretic approach would avoid external "solutions" that denied the instrumentality of worker behavior, because worker traits and skills are, after all, instrumentally valuable, as are incentive and measurement systems. Neither would solutions attempt to change basic moral or ethical values of HRM practitioners according to an external philosophical criterion, because they are taken to be presupposed in the employment relation. Rather, solutions would have to promote a kind of "facing up" to the underlying sociality of employment, what Honneth describes as a problem of acknowledgement or attention.

This aspect of recognition theory implies both "good news" and "bad news" for HRM practice. The bad news is that there is no "silver bullet" to solving normative pathologies through codes-of-ethics, value alignment, or other kind of organizational change; change, rather, would be a subtle shift in "stance" of HRM systems. The good news, contrary to Lukacs' (1971) perspective, is that preventing reification would not require social revolution; because existing relations presuppose recognition, such relations could be maintained along with attempts to raise the self-conscious awareness of their bases among HRM practitioners. Put differently, it is not the work arrangements themselves which reify work, but the fact that they obscure their own origins in recognition, that promotes processes of forgetting. In principle, then, it is possible for a recognition-rich work environment to coexist with human resources views.

How would such consciousness-raising or recognizing of original acknowledgement be promoted? Unfortunately, to this point recognition theory does not provide much direction; in its current development, the diagnosis of social pathologies receives a more thorough treatment than do proactive ways to overcome such pathologies. However, given the sources of attentional deficit described above, some initial directions could be proposed.

For example, Pless and Maak (2004) use recognition concepts to discuss building cultures of diversity in organizations. Rather than discussing diversity in legal or performance contexts, promoting diversity should be considered as a form of solidarity, recognizing differences because they reflect the richness of a common humanity. They argue that a diversity culture based on recognition could, paradoxically, lead to greater instrumental benefits because it allows the free expression of differences without fear of such differences being exploited or taken out of the context of the person's autonomous life choices. To this end, they replace the term "HRM" with "Human Relations Management," because the latter de-emphasizes the treatment of employees as material or financial resources. "Human Relations" would thus be an alternative to the "Human Capital" approach, as a frame for HRM.

Adding further to recognition theory's ability to unpack diversity issues, from this lens we can recognize a particular internal tension in diversity issues that is informative for work practices in general. Referring back to the discussion of the progressive forms of recognition, we see that the workplace involves both rights-based forms of solidarity (which emphasizes formal equality and universal human dignity) and esteem-based recognition (which emphasizes particularistic dignity and esteem through achieving good works that are intersubjectively recognized as such). In Honneth study (as in Hegel previously), these forms of identity formation are dialectically related and mutually reinforcing (Honneth 1995a, b). However, because they seem to superficially represent opposite principles (i.e., equality vs. distinction), it might be difficult to understand how diversity promotion coheres with solidarity and strong organizational culture. A recognition perspective helps theorize this apparent difficulty in diversity studies, and by extension, in the myriad organizational spaces where equality and distinction principles coexist in tension.

Also related to diversity, while Pless and Maak (2004) focus on organizational cultures, recognition theory can further be used to highlight the diverse forms of work that are left unrecognized in contemporary society (Fraser and Honneth 2003). Because work constitutes a form of social recognition, the definition of work involves ideological and exclusionary aspects whereby entire groups (such as unpaid household labor), or sets of behaviors (e.g., organizational citizenship or prosocial behaviors) are left outside of recognized work relations. Thus, the recognition of forms of work is specifically tied to distributional outcomes (Fraser and Honneth 2003). Leveraging this idea critically, HRM practices like maternity leave, work-life flexibility, or the promotion of prosocial, extra-role behavior involve economic-distributional decisions that promote the recognition of certain forms of life. Such decisions are not purely economic but are demonstrative of forms of social respect and value.

Recognition theory also illuminates important non-diversity issues, such as the social role of incentives. Because reification is closely connected with forms of economic exchange (Lukacs 1971), although not determined by these forms (Honneth 2008a), incentive systems play an important symbolic role in acknowledging or subverting employee autonomy. Deci et al. (1999), for example, show meta-analytically that reward systems can be detrimental to intrinsic task motivation when rewards are expected and contingent. They explain this with the idea that such reward systems can compromise employee's sense of autonomy or self-determination. Unexpected yet salient rewards, however, do not show such effect. On the contrary, such rewards often increase intrinsic motivation by showing that employee contributions are valued and recognized. Although Deci et al. (1999) do not reference recognition theory, these results are consistent with one of its main assumptions, namely, that the social-integrative function of work confirms workers' sense of autonomy and identity, but that economic exchanges can cause this self-determination to be "forgotten," as the reward becomes an end in itself. But if rewards are configured such as to avoid such forgetting, autonomy can reemerge as part of the work experience.

Other literature more closely aligned with recognition theory itself acknowledges that the symbolic framing of incentive systems has important implications beyond the economic value of incentives. Heinich (2009), for example, looks at the recognition effects of vocational prizes, such as professional artistic and scientific awards, which can symbolize social recognition when their outcomes are seen as not politically determined and the community of judges is psychologically important to the candidates. Thus, rather than the economic value or even the reputational esteem conferred by a prize, Heinich argues, such prizes place one within a community of peers as a respected member, giving stability to members' professional identities. Similarly, Sayer (2007) argues that maintaining a temporal distance between reward and action (a point also discussed by Heinich) increases worker dignity by removing the perception of reward contingency, another factor that Deci et al. (1999) find to diminish intrinsic motivation. Finally, Holgrewe (2001) argues that social admiration through workplace recognition programs can increase a sense of social belonging, unless such admiration is "ritualized" (i.e., standardized), in which case it can promote jealousy and competition.

In all these cases, it is acknowledged that the recognition possibilities of incentive systems are tied to their ability to signify social respect, autonomy, and belongingness beyond economic value. In Honneth's (2009) terms,

incentive systems exhibit a "social integration" function in addition to an "economic integration" function, and that once this double function is recognized; it is possible to maintain an economically integrated HRM system while recognizing its social-integrative aspects.

Evaluating a Reification Perspective on HRM

A critical ethics perspective on HRM practice, born out of a concern for work effects on well-being, fits well with recognition theory. The latter's focus on the interpersonal respect, its emphasis on community as a source of dignity, and its ability to critique the world of work while retaining work as a central aspect of human worth, make it a useful theoretical tool. As Honneth (2009) states, despite the growing instability and precarization of employment relations, work remains perhaps the central category for social identity and a meaningful life, a situation only more pressing because of the growing transnationalism of work spaces and the integration of women into the work force. In this scenario, the addition/substitution of work identities vis à vis traditional geographically bounded or kinship-based identities, and the extension of work as a crucial psychological support for larger segments of the population, means that the ethics of employee dignity are more pressing than ever before.

Viewing employee dignity through a reification lens, and particularly through the recognition-theoretic reformulation of the reification notion, offers several advantages in this regard. Because of its critical theory roots, the recognition theory and reification attempt an internal critique of work practices, trying to reconcile the experience of lack of dignity at work with expectations *constitutive of the work role* that such dignity be provided. The critical perspective thus does not rely on external visions of the proper work role, avoiding utopian claims (Burrell 1994) that both academics and managers might find problematic. Rather, recognition theory wagers that if managers properly understood the relational standpoints implicit in their own practices, they would be led to recognize, and not reify, employees (Honneth 2009).

Second, the link between critical theory and community-based practice views allows recognition theory to engage with practice-based ethical theories. For example, MacIntyre's (1981) discussion of practice-based ethics distinguishes between goods derived because of work practices (external goods) versus goods that inhere in the performance of the practices themselves (internal goods). The latter tend to mark communities of practice, where the perfection of a practice both justifies and legitimates the community and confers esteem on its individual members (Lovell 2007). Thus, a scientist profiting from an invention would receive an external good, but the internal good that flows from discovery would both confer esteem on the scientist and strengthen the scientific community as a whole. The increasing popularity of practice views in organizational studies (e.g., Feldman and Orlikowsky 2011) means that theories that help us (a) understand the symbolic functions of practice, (b) understand the community embeddedness and reciprocal influence of practices on communities, and (c) understand how practices influence the attainment of human flourishing or the "good life" are particularly timely in the current intellectual climate of business ethics.

Third, while earlier visions of reification (Lukacs 1971) were more squarely based on a Marxian paradigm, Honneth deliberately distances himself from such perspectives by allowing for the possibility (indeed the necessity) of fundamental recognition in economic exchange (Honneth 2008a; Jay 2008). While for Lukacs, overcoming reification was a revolutionary, proletarian act, Honneth generalizes the need for recognition and the danger of reification to social actors more generally. As Jay (2008, p. 9) states it, "no one has a monopoly of primal recognition." The advantages of this move are, first, that its acceptance does not force managers or business scholars to adopt a Marxian paradigm, but rather to acknowledge the centrality of interpersonal recognition in the formation of individual dignity. Second, overcoming reification does not require overthrowing a market system of exchange, but rather remaining vigilant as to the cognitive and social biases that the operation of such a system can promote (Jay 2008).

The possibility of recognition from within the current economic system, however, has drawn criticism. Jay (2008, p 10), for example, questions whether "remembering a past hurt (or recapturing the trace of positive nurturance)" is enough to remedy social ills and restore dignity, seeing it as a necessary but insufficient condition for worker well-being. Chari (2010) critiques Honneth's characterization of recognition as an "irreducible kernel" of social relations as leading to an apolitical position. Similarly, Fraser (1995; Fraser and Honneth 2003), critiquing recognition perspectives, viewed recognition theory as conservative, because it does not require radical social transformation. However, according to Honneth, this aspect makes it a workable way to humanize society without demanding proletarian revolution (Honneth 2008a).

In the exchange between Honneth and Fraser (2003), Honneth clarifies that recognition, different than what Fraser mentions as "identity politics," does not substitute material welfare (e.g., worker benefits, increased salaries, decision-making authority) for *merely* symbolic identity recognition. Indeed, some treatments of workplace recognition focus almost entirely on the symbolic aspect of recognition, for example, Pfeffer's (1981, p. 37) claim that

symbolic managers "trade status for substance." Rather, for Honneth, material aspects of work are important forms of recognition, and embody recognition when used in the context of community solidarity. Thus, a salary increase can signal respect as much as it can be used to "buy off" a lack of respect, and the task of the recognition scholar is to examine the subtle performative shifts that can greatly change the meaning of the material.

Thus, in principle, because reification is due to an intersubjectively based pathology of meaning, rather than a social-structural, objectively determined pathology, it is possible for actors to recognize each other's dignity within the current economic constraints. In this way, recognition theory both levies a critique against current conditions, and at the same time allows actors to find an ethical space within these conditions. This makes recognition theory ideal as a critical ethical project for HRM, allowing it to remain within traditional employment relations and launch its critique from this interior space, without rejecting HRM outright as an unethical institution.

A third advantage of the recognition-theoretic view is that the abstract and pre-cognitive nature of recognition allows for a diversity of ethical forms of life, rather than promoting a specific set of HRM values or codes (Pless and Maak 2004). Forms of recognition do not have to lead to similar moral obligations, but rather to plural or even contradictory forms of moral actions depending on the "concrete communities" within which recognition takes place (Honneth 1997). Thus, recognition views have the benefit of allowing for plural ethical standpoints while at the same time supporting a view of basic human worth (Jay 2008). Indeed, existing recognition perspectives in the business ethics literature have focused on workplace diversity (Pless and Maak 2004).

This very possibility for diverse forms of recognition, however, has drawn criticism. Some view recognition norms as idealistic (Duttmann 2000), and others have noted that personal differentiation is as important to identity as interpersonal acknowledgment (Butler 2008). Butler (2008) hits at the core of recognition theory, doubting both that original affective affirmation is plausible, and that a reified attitude is impersonal. To Butler, reification and other dehumanizing practices are often infused with dominance urges, requiring recognition of the other in the very act of social humiliation. Bullying, for example, requires that the target be aware of, and acknowledge, ill-treatment. Where interpersonal recognition takes perverse forms, according to Butler, recognition theory gives no recourse.

Indeed, by analytically separating recognition from positive emotions, Honneth buys the general applicability of the theory at the cost of its putative normative force. The importance of affirming original bonds is questionable if such affirmation provides no compass for specific social or organizational changes.

A second limitation similarly involves the variety of sources of recognition possible at work. Although we have assumed that the work relationship is primarily constituted through employment contracts, the role of professional associations, craft guilds, or other types of work-based relationships cannot be overlooked (Greenwood et al. 2002). Where there are strong non-employer ties, alternate identifications might substitute for the employee–employer relationship, which might become thereby less central for recognition.

Two responses may here be given. First, while in many professions the employment relationship does not constitute the primary basis of worker identity (c.f. Deranty and Renault 2007), this fact does not refute, but rather limits the scope of, the effects of employer-based reification. Exclusivity of identity thus acts as a moderator variable for the impact of workplace recognition, and future research should examine the dynamics of recognition in other, non-employer work relationships. Second, even where the primary identification is outside of the employer, the centrality of employers in (a) providing a space and structure for work, (b) evaluating, rewarding, and punishing performance related outcomes, and (c) placing the employee within a status hierarchy defined organizationally means that employers play a central actor in recognition processes. Some evidence exists (Hillard 2005) that organizational practices matter for ties of solidarity even in craft-type occupations, suggesting that non-organizational identities interact with, but do not fully compensate for, lack of organizational recognition. Because the study of recognition at work is still incipient, however, much work needs to be done in disentangling the relative influences of different components of recognition.

Conclusion

In this article, I have outlined an ethical approach to HRM based on recognition theory, and its unique treatment of reification at work. While reification was important concept to earlier descriptions of worker exploitation (Lukacs 1971), these versions were linked to a theoretical legacy of Marxian thought (e.g., Burris 1988) that equated reification with economic exchange per se. Recognition theory frees the concept for more general usage, in a language understandable by those who write about and practice HRM, although as described above, this generalization comes at the cost of a clear social-transformative paradigm.

Despite this limitation, there is cause for optimism. There are several areas in which "remembering" can promote constructive organizational changes, maintaining market-based employment relationships while re-emphasizing recognition. Attending to the social-integrative

functions of exchange, labor or otherwise, can maintain work structures while reaffirming human dignity social value. By focusing on recognition as a source of this dignity, and reification as a symptom of its absence, future work on ethics in HRM has a diagnostic tool that combines the values of individual affirmation and autonomy, social solidarity, and the universalistic value of respect. The recognition perspective thus provides a rapprochement between descriptive psychological and sociological perspectives, on the one hand, and normative perspectives, on the other. The next step would be for research to illustrate the subtle ways in which recognition is achieved or subverted in specific workplace settings.

Such empirical work can discover and refine our thinking regarding workplace recognition, and provide the ground with which to turn recognition into a normative claim. While claims about worker well-being abound in academic and practical contexts, while such claims remain ungrounded in the constitutive norms of social life, they appear disjointed, arbitrary, and without wide-reaching social legitimacy (Honneth 2009). Once recognized as demands for full participation in a society valuing participation, such claims gain renewed legitimacy in an era where the workplace dignity has been made increasingly precarious.

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