

Abstracts for Symposium

Democracy in everyday lives as a struggle for recognition.
The theory of recognition as a lens for social work research

Keywords:

Democracy, Everyday Lives, Recognition, Disrespect, Social Work Research, Social Work Theory

Table of Content

Abstract: Symposium

Democracy in everyday lives as a struggle for recognition. The theory of recognition as a lens for social work research..... 2

Abstract: Paper 1

Practising democracy in everyday relationships: recognition, respect and participation..... 3

Abstract: Paper 2

Poverty, Voice & Participation in everyday lives. The struggle for voice of people in poverty as a struggle for recognition 4

Abstract: Paper 3

Employing recognition theory to broaden understandings of problematic drugs use..... 5

Abstract: Paper 4

Rethinking love – a foundation for recognition and participation in social work practice..... 6

Abstract: Symposium

Democracy in everyday lives as a struggle for recognition.
The theory of recognition as a lens for social work research

Mary Richmond describes democracy, as quoted in the overarching theme of the conference, as “not a form of organization but a daily habit of life”. She goes on to assert that social workers must have in their hearts a “spiritual conviction of the infinite worth of our common humanity.” Such an understanding takes us beyond structural manifestations of democracy in electoral processes and in concepts of rights, citizenship and even participation, towards a more subjective (and inter-subjective) conceptualisation. Social work as a profession and academic discipline is well placed to observe this shift beyond structural expressions of democracy. A social work perspective on democracy needs to highlight how democracy is enacted, experienced, and thought about in everyday encounters. Indeed, the positioning of the profession at the contradictory mediation between the individual and society confers such a role as fundamental to its identity.

The symposium will draw on the German social theorist, Axel Honneth’s (1995) theory of recognition to ground and exemplify our arguments. Honneth emphasises the importance of the inter-subjective sphere. In Honneth’s thinking individuals and society are deeply interlinked. The experiences that people have in everyday lives and the relationships to themselves, others and the order of society are shaped by interactions with others and in society. He makes the case that human flourishing is built upon three pillars: love, rights, and solidarity, each of which emerges through a struggle for recognition in the domains of family, the state and civil society, against different forms of disrespect.

Within the symposium we will show that Honneth’s recognition theory provides a compelling foundation for social work research. The symposium will feature four papers: *Paper 1* will discuss the importance of relationships in social work, arguing that without recognition, respect, and reciprocity, participation in both democratic spheres and professional relationships is hindered. *Paper 2* will explore how poverty and exclusion create precarious speaking positions, limiting democratic participation and fostering stigmatisation and shame. *Paper 3* applies a recognition lens to research on drug use, emphasizing the need for social work perspectives beyond medical or systemic interventions, using a democratic and participative approach. *Paper 4* focuses on the emerging discourse of love in state care for children, using Honneth’s work to argue that love in relationships can bridge individuality and community, essential for participation.

Abstract: Paper 1

Practising democracy in everyday relationships: recognition, respect and participation

Starting from a belief that democracy is premised on (at least the possibility of) all citizens having equal participation rights, this presentation sketches out a conceptual space within which participation can be meaningfully understood, facilitated, and enacted. Given social work's engagement with individuals and groups who are typically amongst the more marginalised and excluded members of society, promoting the right to participation has become a core principle for practice, and this is reflected internationally in professional Codes of Practice. This principle is pursued through the purposeful use of relationships, and this relational turn brings an affective dimension to how practitioners think about and practise democracy in everyday encounters. Putting relationships at the heart of democracy requires us to reflect on how they are understood/theorised and used in everyday policy, practice and research. This paper uses Honneth's Recognition Theory to explore the dynamics of relationship-based social work - particularly at the relational 'sharp end', for example, in child protection or adult safeguarding - where decision-making is fraught with ethical challenges, and authentic participation hard to come by. In this presentation, I highlight how understanding struggles for recognition enhances understanding of professional interactions. We all have a need for recognition – to be seen, heard and acknowledged by others in different key spheres of our lives. Without recognition, and the respect and reciprocity that genuine recognition affords, participation in the democratic sphere, as well as in closer and often complex interpersonal professional relationships, is compromised.

Abstract: Paper 2

Poverty, Voice & Participation in everyday lives.

The struggle for voice of people in poverty as a struggle for recognition

While issues of poverty and exclusion frequently appear in the media, the discourse is predominantly shaped by voices outside the affected groups, discussing poverty and those impacted – often in a manner that is stigmatising and morally charged. The perspective of those affected, however, is often obscured. This ultimately limits democratic participation: Not only is poverty associated with stigmatisation and shame, but also restricts possibilities for political articulation experienced by those in a precarious position. Against this background, it is noteworthy that since May 2022, many German-speaking Twitter users (now X) have publicly discussed their experiences of poverty using the hashtag #IchBinArmutsbetroffen (#IAmStruckByPoverty), with over six million tweets so far.

Our project aimed to examine to which extent people affected by poverty are able to articulate their experiences publicly. Consequently, we conducted a systematic analysis of the discourse theorising the articulations as part of a struggle for recognition. Firstly, we downloaded all tweets linked to the hashtag and summarised them into conversations. Next, we selected and analysed approximately 7000 conversations at five different times, ultimately focusing on 1600 that expressed subjective experiences of poverty.

Our findings reveal that the articulations can be understood as political thematisations of poverty from a precarious speaking position. We identified three distinct forms of articulations, revealing the (im)possibilities of political protest for those marginalised.

In our presentation, we will demonstrate how an analytical perspective informed by recognition theory can enrich social work research, highlighting the struggle for recognition in the everyday lives of people.

Employing recognition theory to broaden understandings of problematic drugs use

Scotland's, and specifically the city of Dundee's, drugs crisis is well known – the city is said to have the highest rate of drugs deaths in Europe. Drugs use has historically been treated as a criminal justice and/or medical problem. The Scottish Government now seeks to frame responses within a human rights framework, while a growing body of sociological work seeks to explain the situation through reference to the social determinants of health and wellbeing. However, these foci rarely get to grips with the subjective dimensions of people's lives, the experiences that lead them to turn to drugs and their trajectories once caught up in a cycle of problematic drugs use. We consider drugs misuse as resulting from individuals' persistent struggles for recognition in everyday life. This cannot be addressed through medical intervention or systems responses alone. This paper will report on research from the University of Dundee, partnering with a local drugs charity. Theoretically, our research is informed by Axel Honneth's theories of recognition and disrespect. Consistent with such a framing, we employ a democratic and participative approach to research design. Taking an ethnographic approach over an extended period, the research will consider whether and how negative emotions might be mitigated, and people helped change through respectful everyday socio-educational experiences and relationships. The project is in its early stages. This paper will outline its theoretical underpinnings and methodology and will report on early findings. Our intention is to develop a distinctly social work perspective to problematic drugs use.

Abstract: Paper 4

Rethinking love – a foundation for recognition and participation in social work practice

This presentation discusses the connection between love as a deep form of recognition and people's possibilities to participate in society. Honneth's thoughts on love as a form of recognition go beyond an individual's actions and can be seen as a foundation for building self-esteem, fostering self-confidence in social interactions, and as a prerequisite for people's participation in society. In the area of social work, the renewed focus on love in practice mainly stems from young people's yearning for personal connections, recognition, and the need to receive care from social workers. This presentation is based on research conducted in Child Welfare Services in Norway. It explores the concept of love from various perspectives and approaches, aiming to uncover its significance in social work. The research methodology includes several methods, such as individual interviews, group interviews with social workers, and participant observation within a specific adolescent follow-up program in the Child Welfare Services. In line with the recognition theory, the findings suggest that understanding love is a means of genuinely seeing and recognizing each other's individuality, fostering social inclusion, and inviting people to be part of a closely connected community. Actively embracing love within relationships can bridge the gap from individuality to community, which is crucial for participating in various societal groups. Rethinking love within social work involves recognizing and valuing individuals, closely tied to solidarity and the inclusion of vulnerable groups, which is a fundamental aim in social work practice.