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Individualiserande eller kategoriserande erkännande? Begreppsdiskussion om relationen mellan familjehemsplacerade barn och deras socialsekreterare

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this conceptual paper is to use Axel Honneth's theory of *recognition* to analyse, discuss and understand the relationship between children and youth in Swedish foster care and their child welfare workers. The discussions on recognition are related to other theoretical perspectives and to empirical examples from interviews and focus groups with foster children and child welfare workers. The article highlights the usefulness of Honneth's theory for understanding the tension between different dimensions of the relationship, and specifically to understand what form of recognition that constitutes the starting point for the relationship. However, the theory needs to be problematised and further developed to serve as a proper analytical tool for understanding this specific context. The article problematises Honneth's approach to childhood and recognition and the understanding of mutuality in caring relationships. Specific attention is given to Honneth's dichotomy between recognition and misrecognition in relation to rights. Conceptual discussions are presented that highlight that the opposite of misrecognition with regard to rights should, in this context, be understood as a dichotomy between *categorizing* or *individualizing* recognition.

SAMMANFATTNING



Syftet med denna teoretiska artikel är att använda Axel Honneths teori om erkännande för att analysera, diskutera och förstå relationen mellan barn och unga i svensk familjehemsvård och deras socialsekreterare. Diskussionen om erkännande kopplas samman med andra teoretiska perspektiv samt till empiriska exempel från intervjuer och fokusgrupper med familjehemsplacerade barn och socialsekreterare. Artikeln påvisar hur användbar Honneths teori är för att förstå spänningen mellan relationens olika dimensioner samt specifikt för att förstå vilken form av erkännande som utgör fundamentet och startpunkten för relationen. Teorin behöver dock problematiseras och vidareutvecklas för att fungera

KEYWORDS

Foster care; child welfare workers; foster children; relationships; recognition

NYCKELORD

Familjehemsvård; socialsekreterare; familjehemsplacerade barn; relationer; erkännande

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som ett fullgott analytiskt verktyg i förståelsen av den specifika kontexten. Artikeln problematiserar Honneths syn på barndom samt hans förståelse av ömsesidighet i omsorgsrelationer. Särskilt fokuseras Honneths dikotomi mellan erkännande och misskännande när det gäller rättsligt erkännande. Teoretiska och konceptuella diskussioner presenteras som betonar att motsatsen till rättsligt misskännande bör, inom denna kontext, förstås som en dikotomi mellan *kategoriserande* eller *individualiserande* erkännande.

Introduction

Several previous studies have highlighted that outcomes in social care to a great extent are affected by the relationship between the clients and the social workers, and many scholars emphasise that social work should be *relationship-based* (e.g. Bruhn & Källström, 2018; Munro, 2001; Ruch, 2005; Trevithick, 2003). Scholars adhering to this view propose that the relationship between social worker and client should be based on closeness and trust, since they are prerequisites for the professional to be able to achieve an adequate understanding of the client's needs, desires and situation (e.g. Munro, 2001; Trevithick, 2003). Some scholars consider the relationship between the client and the professional to be the single most important factor for understanding different preconditions and results in social work (e.g. Hingley-Jones & Mandin, 2007; Knei-Paz, 2009). However, it has been emphasised that a relationship-based social work requires that social workers are able to perceive and respond to the uniqueness of each client (e.g. Ruch, 2005). When it comes to research on relational aspects of foster care, the main focus has been on the relationships between the foster children and their foster and birth families (e.g. Schofield, Beek, Ward, & Biggart, 2013).

In a research project, my colleagues and I have explored the relationship between foster children and their assigned child welfare workers at the social services in Sweden. These empirical studies have shown, for example, that the foster children experience that their relationships with child welfare workers are constrained due to a lack of time, availability and trust, and that they – with few exceptions – expect the relationship with a child welfare worker to be characterised by distance and formality (Lindahl & Bruhn, 2017). The child welfare workers have similar experiences, but also highlight that they are operating in a context full of dilemmas, where they are primarily expected to perform administrative tasks, such as documenting and decision-making – injecting formality and distance into the relationships with the foster children – at the same time as they are expected to put effort into establishing closeness and trust with them (Lindahl & Bruhn, 2018). In another study within this project, it was emphasised that the relationship must also be understood from an institutional perspective. The prerequisites for the relationship are clearly affected by *regulative*, *normative* and *cultural-cognitive* expectations (cf. Scott, 2014) about the social services as an organisation and institution. This means, among other things, that even though there are regulative expectations of closeness and trust in the relationships between child welfare workers and foster children in Sweden, the relationship is also constrained by normative and cultural-cognitive expectations about how the relationship should be conducted by the employees within this contextual framework. These institutional forces not only constrain the relationships within the specific social services organisation, but also produce conformity between different local organisations (Lindahl, 2018).

Even though there have been some other studies, alongside those in our project, that pay specific attention to the relationship between foster children and their child welfare workers, the research on this topic needs further theorising. In cases where theories have been used, the focus is often on individual aspects, such as the child welfare workers' interpersonal skills, level of education and emotional competence (e.g. De Boer & Coady, 2007; Winter, 2009). In our above-mentioned previous studies, these individual aspects have been complemented by theoretical perspectives that focus on individual, organisational and institutional aspects, such as *role theory* (cf. Lindahl & Bruhn, 2017),

theories on *professions* and *professionalism* (cf. Lindahl & Bruhn, 2018), and *institutional theory* (cf. Lindahl, 2018). However, in this conceptual article, a theoretical holistic approach is pursued, aiming to relate to the perspectives of both the foster children and the child welfare workers, while at the same time taking into account an understanding of the organisational and institutional conditions. In line with this pursuit, this conceptual article takes its point of departure in the theory of *recognition*, with the ambition to reach a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between foster children and their child welfare workers. Particular emphasis is placed on the theoretical developments of *Axel Honneth*, whose reasoning on this topic is scrutinised as a possible basis for achieving the sought understanding. Other scholars have found recognition theory to be especially useful for understanding relationships in social work, because it focuses on the general significance of interpersonal relationships, and on the importance of understanding how relationships are affected by factors on different levels (e.g. Garrett, 2010; Houston, 2010; Ridley et al., 2016; Thomas, 2012). The foster children's need for recognition in their relationships with their child welfare workers appears to be particularly important, because these children often have experienced neglect in their birth family (e.g. Egelund & Hestbæk, 2003; Turney, 2012), instability in their placement in foster families (e.g. Skoog, Dalin, Rönnbäck, & Khoo, 2012; Ward, 2009), and different kinds of problems in school (e.g. Vinnerljung & Sallnäs, 2008). In the following sections, the theory of recognition is further described and discussed. Different reasons are presented for why the theory – with its perceived strengths and areas needing improvement – is especially advantageous for understanding the relationship between foster children and child welfare workers. Some empirical examples from interviews with foster children and child welfare workers are used to illustrate the conceptual reasoning, but the article should mainly be viewed as a conceptual paper. Comments are provided in relation to contemporary debates on the use and understanding of recognition theory, and theoretical elaborations and developments are tested to adjust and improve the understanding of the complexities of the relationship between foster children and their child welfare workers.

The aim of this conceptual paper is to use Axel Honneth's theory of *recognition* to analyse, discuss and understand the relationship between children and youth in Swedish foster care and their child welfare workers. Research questions are as follows:

- (i) How can the foster children's and child welfare workers' experiences and expectations regarding this relationship be understood in terms of the three forms of recognition; *love/closeness*, *rights* and *solidarity*?
- (ii) In what ways do the different forms of recognition relate to each other within this relationship, and what possible dilemmas and conflicts between these forms can be linked to the current Swedish institutional and organisational framework?
- (iii) How can Honneth's theory of recognition be problematised and further developed to reach a deeper and more holistic understanding of the relationship in focus?

The empirical examples are gathered from individual interviews with foster children and child welfare workers conducted in a previous evaluation of a Swedish national pilot project (see Oscarsson & Lindahl, 2014), as well as two additional focus groups with child welfare workers (see Lindahl & Bruhn, 2018).

Different forms of recognition and the sub-roles of the child welfare worker

Many scholars in the social sciences have used the concept of recognition. This article mainly makes use of Axel Honneth's definitions and descriptions. These are based on the tradition of *critical theory* that has been developed by theorists, such as Habermas and Adorno, at the *Institute for Social Research* in Frankfurt, Germany (Honneth, 2000/2003). Honneth (1995, 2000/2003) argues, in brief, that in today's individualised society people have a need to obtain a sense of autonomous value,

which makes *self-realization* important. Self-realization is about feeling like a fully-fledged citizen with fundamental rights and responsibilities, and this requires that the individual experiences three different forms of recognition, through *love*, *rights* and *solidarity*. Individuals can also be disrespected or violated within these domains, which Honneth (2007) refers to as *misrecognition* or *disrespect*. This article rests on the assumption that when it comes to children and youth in Swedish foster care, all three forms of recognition overlap in the formal and legal expectations of the relationship with their child welfare worker. This becomes particularly clear when analysing the work that child welfare workers perform through their different *sub-roles*.

Honneth (2000/2003) suggests that recognition should generally be understood as a mutual process occurring between individuals. However, in cases where an individual is in particular need of protection, support and recognition from another individual, Honneth stresses that mutual recognition cannot be expected. The relationship between foster child and child welfare worker could therefore, according to Honneth, be understood as a 'unidirectional care relationship' since it is based on the welfare worker's 'obligation to care' (Honneth, 2000/2003, pp. 152–153). In the following discussions, however, I will argue why it is important to take the significance of mutuality into account even in understanding this type of relationship. My theoretical argumentation on this matter should also be understood in relation to the fact that many scholars have highlighted the importance of mutuality in relationships between clients and social workers (e.g. Trevithick, 2003).

Before presenting a discussion about how different forms of recognition can be related to the sub-roles of the child welfare worker, it should be stressed that in Honneth's (1995, 2000/2003) definitions and explanations, children's need for recognition is only dealt with in relation to love. Honneth's argumentation implies that only adults have developed the ability to be aware of their legal rights and of the impact of their own unique qualities. In line with findings within *the sociology of childhood(s)* (e.g. James & James, 2008) this study is based on the premise that children should be seen as aware subjects and social actors with specific rights and abilities, which they themselves experience through their relationships with various actors and stakeholders. However, as the United Nations (1989) has declared in the *Convention of the Rights of the Child*, a child's ability to function as a social actor may be impaired in situations where, for example, the child cannot grasp the situation in its entirety and has a limited understanding of the consequences of different choices. Therefore, it is sometimes important that children be protected from risks that they may be unaware of. That said, this article opposes the idea that only recognition in the form of love is of relevance in understanding children's social relations. Instead, it is of utmost importance to consider recognition taking the form of rights and solidarity to understand the complexities and dilemmas that can exist, especially in the relationship between foster children and their child welfare workers.

Attachment – love/closeness

According to Swedish law, each foster child shall have its own specially selected child welfare worker, and their relationship shall be characterised by frequent contacts, availability and openness. Further, it is specified that the child welfare worker is expected to be a central person in the child's life, and that the two are supposed to have a good and trustful relationship (Government Bill, 2012/13:10). In previous studies we have referred to this duty as the child welfare worker's *attachment* sub-role vis-à-vis the foster child (Lindahl & Bruhn, 2017, 2018). This can be linked to previous research in social work that highlights the importance of a caring and emotional bond between the welfare worker and the child (e.g. Holland, 2010; Leeson, 2010), and can therefore be related to the form of recognition that Honneth (1995, 2000/2003) refers to as *love*. Honneth stresses that this form of recognition appears not only in love relationships, but in all relationships characterised by emotional support and care. The relationship between a foster child and a welfare worker is not a love relationship as such, but still a relationship that should be based on emotional closeness and care. Since the word 'love' may suggest incorrect connotations within this context, this form of recognition is hereafter referred to as *closeness*. In this form of recognition, the child is recognised as a unique individual with specific

needs for closeness, trust, care and safety, which are vital ingredients in the individual's development of *self-confidence*. Honneth (2007) argues that disrespect within this domain of recognition can affect the person's self-image in a negative way. Therefore, it is important to emphasise that many foster children have been living with neglectful or abusive parents or other caregivers (e.g. Egelund & Hestbæk, 2003; Turney, 2012). Several foster children have also experienced different kinds of instability in their placements, and it is common that children in foster care move from home to home. This disrupts the continuity that is crucial for the development of closeness and trust in the child's relationship with the members of the foster family (e.g. Skoog et al., 2012; Ward, 2009). Therefore, many of the foster children may have experienced misrecognition in both their birth family and their foster family/families, and for that reason they tend to perceive themselves as not worthy of care or emotional concern.

In our above-mentioned research project, it was concluded that qualities that can be defined as recognition in the form of closeness are rare in the relationships between foster children and their child welfare workers. However, when both foster children and child welfare workers are asked to describe relationships that they perceive as being most well-functioning, recognition through closeness is prominent. The children often describe this in terms of their appreciation of the welfare worker being 'like a friend' or 'a person like you or me' (Lindahl & Bruhn, 2017). Other scholars who have shown that foster children desire this kind of closeness in the relationship with their welfare worker, have asked whether these are realistic or even desirable qualities (e.g. McLeod, 2010). Results from our project, however, show that both foster children and child welfare workers emphasise the specific and vulnerable situation of the foster child, and point out that the child's needs for closeness, trust, care and safety have to be met by the welfare worker. This is because of the absence of other important caregivers.

I've grown up with the social services present throughout all of my life. If they've chosen to place me [in foster care], they should expect to be asked questions [by me]. If I would have been living at home I would have turned to my parents, but the social services have to be prepared to have to cover that part as well. (Foster child, girl, 17–19 years)

For many children, a long time passes before they are placed in foster care. ... They're very torn up and don't trust anyone. ... They need someone they can trust. Then often it's us, from the authorities, who can say 'now you can live here, and things will be fine, and we'll work together so that things will turn out well.' ... A seven-year-old who has changed foster homes five or six times, and has been to the child psychiatry services and been ripped apart by all kinds of tests, and so on, then we may have to sit down and even hug and cry and all that. (Child welfare worker, focus group)

Results from our research project have also shown that closeness in the relationship between foster children and child welfare workers must be understood in relation to the presence of mutuality (cf. Lindahl & Bruhn, 2017). It appears that in cases where the foster child experiences recognition in the form of closeness from the child welfare worker, the child also recognises the welfare worker as a unique individual. However, the establishment of closeness is obstructed by organisational and institutional conditions. Because of the high level of staff turnover within these services, many foster children have suffered the consequences of having to change child welfare worker multiple times (Augsberger & Swenson, 2015; Lindahl & Bruhn, 2017, 2018). Recognition through closeness is dependent on trust, which in turn is dependent on continuity. Therefore, having to change welfare worker is not only an obstacle to recognition through closeness, but sometimes even a form of misrecognition towards the foster child. However, even when the child gets the opportunity to keep the same welfare worker over a long period of time, the establishment of closeness is obstructed by widespread normative and cultural-cognitive expectations that relationships between foster children and child welfare workers should, and most likely will, be characterised by distance and formality (cf. Lindahl, 2018).

This way of capturing how organisational and institutional factors constrain the establishment of closeness and trust in the studied relationships serves as a clear example of one of the benefits of using recognition theory as analytical tool. Honneth (2007, p. 74) describes this analytical process

as a way of revealing 'the socio-structural causes responsible for a distortion of the social framework of recognition in each particular case.'

Official – rights

The child welfare worker also has formal *administrative* responsibilities. This part of the work consists of documentation, decision-making and, in a structured, standardised and often manual-based way, monitoring and planning the foster care. In our previous studies (Lindahl & Bruhn, 2017, 2018) we have titled this the *official* sub-role, which theoretically can be linked to the domain of recognition that Honneth (1995, 2000/2003) refers to as *rights*. Here, the individual is recognised on the basis on his/her formal and legal rights, which reinforces the development of *self-respect*. Central to this form of recognition is that every individual has the same fundamental rights; that 'all are equal under the law.' Honneth argues that recognition through rights implies that the individual is recognised as an *abstract* citizen belonging to an aggregated category (in this case being a foster child), which implies that the individual's unique needs and specific qualities are not in focus in this form of recognition. Further, Honneth (2007) states that disrespect within this domain consists of the denial of universal legal and formal rights.

Our research has shown that both the foster children and the child welfare workers highlight that most of their contacts are characterised by the welfare worker's exercise of authority and official control over the child's situation, which often causes the relationship to be perceived as dominated by administrative tasks and formality. Regarding the perception of formality in the relationship, the children often describe the child welfare worker as a distant figure whom they prefer not to open up to in a private and intimate manner (Lindahl & Bruhn, 2017). The child welfare workers describe that administrative tasks not only are the main part of their work, but they also constitute a foundation and starting-point for the relationships with the foster children. Further, the welfare workers stress that they are operating under strong organisational and institutional expectations that their relationships with foster children should primarily be a matter of catering to their universal rights. This is for instance manifested by requirements to use standardised assessment systems and manuals in their work with foster children (Lindahl & Bruhn, 2018). These approaches are generally based on the belief that foster children can be treated as a universal category with shared needs and desires, which implies and reinforces the recognition of the child as an abstract citizen (cf. Honneth, 1995, 2000/2003).

Just as in the domain of closeness, it is important to understand the element of mutuality in recognition through rights. In line with Honneth's (1995, 2000/2003) way of describing this as a relationship characterised by unidirectional recognition, it can be concluded that the child welfare worker's recognition of the foster child as an abstract citizen with universal rights is most prominent. However, foster children's perceptions that the child welfare worker is only a person in authority, and that their relationship can only be characterised by formality and distance, can be described as the child recognising the welfare worker as an abstract actor belonging to a universal category. Recognition in the domain of rights therefore overshadows the foster child's and the child welfare worker's mutual perceptions of each other as unique individuals.

Advocacy – solidarity

Many researchers have highlighted that child welfare workers serve as a link not only between the child and the social services as an organisation, but also between the child and the surrounding society at large (e.g. De Boer & Coady, 2007). This implies an *advocacy* sub-role (Lindahl & Bruhn, 2017, 2018), which can be related to the form of recognition that Honneth (1995, 2000/2003) calls *solidarity*. The relationship with the child welfare worker is expected to enable the foster child to experience societal concern, social appreciation and being valued as a unique citizen with specific qualities, all of which Honneth describes as crucial constituents of the individual's development of

self-esteem. Thus, disrespect within this domain of recognition is about dismissal or deprecation of the individual's unique qualities (Honneth, 2007).

Due to our findings, recognition in the form of solidarity appears to be quite rare in the relationships between foster children and their child welfare workers. However, when the children and the welfare workers were asked to describe what they desire from the relationship, both groups highlighted the importance of paying significant attention to the children's unique needs, desires and qualities. Even when the children and welfare workers were asked to describe relationships that they perceive as most well-functioning, recognition in the form of solidarity was indicated (Lindahl & Bruhn, 2017, 2018).

They should listen. Have their own assessment, not only read from the papers. ... Familiarize themselves with my situation. (Foster child, boy, 17–19 years)

(1) You should remember what they've said when you meet them next time, so they notice that they're important. ... (2) You should give feedback and show genuine interest for them as people. (Child welfare workers, focus group)

You tend to forget the important thing. ... In these meetings, the focus may be on the structure rather than meeting each other. I've felt there was too much emphasis on that, instead of having a conversation. (Child welfare worker, focus group)

As the last quote above demonstrates, even though both the children and the welfare workers emphasise the importance of relational qualities that can be described as recognition through solidarity, our findings reveal that this form of recognition is obstructed by organisational and institutional expectations of standardisation and efficiency (cf. Lindahl, 2018; Lindahl & Bruhn, 2018).

Another aspect that appears to be vital for the foster child's recognition through solidarity is for the child to recognise the social services as a solidarity-providing organisation. The child welfare worker occupies an advocacy sub-role in relation to the foster child, and therefore represents, and is intimately connected to, the social services as an organisation. In other words, regarding the importance of mutuality in recognition, it is important that the child should perceive the social services (and its representative – the child welfare worker) as an institution that exists and operates with consideration for each unique child's desires and qualities. When applying recognition theory to the understanding of the relationship between foster children and their child welfare workers, it becomes clear that mutuality in this relationship is a question not only of dyadic aspects, but also of recognition of the surrounding context.

In placements that have existed for a long time ... they [the children] have considered it a good thing that the social services intervened. ... In those cases I've noticed that they've become more and more benevolent towards me. ... They can express that things turned out well. That 'if I would have been left where I was, things wouldn't have turned out well'. ... And, that I'm not some bad person who just came to interrogate them. In those cases, it has not only been about the relationship with me, but also a greater understanding for the overall context. (Child welfare worker, focus group)

The relations between different forms of recognition

In these conceptual discussions, the three forms of recognition are restricted and concentrated to the relationship between foster children and their child welfare workers. As mentioned in the introduction, this way of using recognition theory to understand different dimensions of social work has been done by other scholars (e.g. Garrett, 2010; Houston, 2010; Ridley et al., 2016; Thomas, 2012). The conceptual discussions in this article are based on the premise that of course foster children can be recognised by other actors in different contexts, such as birth parents, foster parents and teachers at school. However, when the three forms of recognition are restricted to the relationship with the child welfare worker, it becomes justified and important to analyse how the three forms are related to each other in this specific relationship and context. Honneth (1995, 2000/2003) states that there is no harmony between the three forms of recognition, but rather permanent tension.

However, he also emphasises that recognition through love (closeness) is the most fundamental form. This means that the individual has to be recognised through love (closeness) before he/she can be recognised in other ways (Honneth, 2007). Our results have shown that the relationship between foster children and child welfare workers first and foremost is based on recognition with regard to rights. This is the dominant picture given by the children – both in their specific experiences and in their general cultural-cognitive expectations of the relationship (Lindahl & Bruhn, 2017, 2018). The child welfare workers also stress that the administrative elements of their work not only are the largest part of their assignment, but also serve as the starting-point for their relationship with foster children (Lindahl & Bruhn, 2018). Even though it is stipulated in Swedish law that the relationship should be characterised by qualities that could be associated with recognition through closeness (Government Bill, 2012/13:10), other institutional expectations regarding the relationship are clearly dominated by a focus on approaches that are related to recognition in terms of rights – and thereby to the child welfare workers' abstraction and categorisation of the foster child. For instance, this is visualised via regulative expectations that the welfare worker should use standardised methods and manuals in working with the children. It also becomes clear that there are dominating normative expectations that child welfare workers should adopt a certain form of professionalism, based on *functional specificity*¹ and distancing approaches (Lindahl, 2018; Lindahl & Bruhn, 2018). In cases where the child receives recognition in the form of love/closeness in relationships with other actors, the focus on rights in the relationship with the welfare worker may be less problematic. However, as mentioned above, many of the foster children lack recognition through love/closeness in their relationships with, for example, their birth families (cf. Egelund & Hestbæk, 2003; Turney, 2012) and foster families (cf. Ward, 2009).

Although it is fundamental that the foster children's universal rights are met in their contact with their child welfare worker, our findings show that this kind of abstraction of the child introduces distance and formality in the relationship – which is counterproductive for recognition in the form of closeness and solidarity. In other words, this could be described as a tension between recognising the child, on the one hand, as an abstract citizen belonging to the category of foster children or, on the other hand, as a unique individual with specific needs, desires and qualities. Regarding this tension, it is especially interesting that the relationships that both the children and the welfare workers describe as the most well-functioning are those where recognition in the domain of rights is complemented by recognition taking the form of closeness and solidarity. Since the relationship is heavily characterised by expectations of recognition in terms of rights, it is, from a theoretical point of view, highly important that the relationship be balanced by recognition through closeness and solidarity. Relationships that are based and founded on recognition in the domain of rights, i.e. that focus on administration and standardised assessments of foster children's universal needs and desires, may constrain the presence of recognition through closeness and solidarity. However, in cases where the child welfare workers have been able to prioritise the relational work, this has resulted in a situation where they are better able to meet the administrative requirements as well (Lindahl & Bruhn, 2018). These findings suggest that relationships based on closeness, emotional concern and mutual awareness of each other as unique individuals may enable a more constructive recognition in the area of rights. Therefore, it is legitimate to ask whether this relationship should be based on recognition in the domain of rights, or instead on love and solidarity.

(R2) I think that social work is actually about building relationships. ... We do have the official responsibility, and we have to perform documentation, which of course is important as well. But for me, that's not the foundation. Because, if the relationship doesn't work and if you don't have the child's trust, things won't work out well. I think you need to start there to be able to get all the pieces together. (Child welfare worker, focus group)

Individualising or categorising recognition?

Other scholars who have contributed to the further development of the concept of recognition have criticised Honneth for being too individualistic in his theoretical understanding. For example, Nancy

Fraser (Fraser & Honneth, 2003) and Taylor (1992) discuss the importance of accounting for individuals' belonging to social groups, and how these groups have their specific struggles for recognition. This perspective captures the significance of understanding social injustice and discrimination of certain social groups, and that an emphasis on social, political and economic *redistribution* should complement the focus on interpersonal recognition. Although I agree with the importance of understanding how political and socio-economic aspects affect individuals' possibilities for self-realization, I believe that Honneth's perspectives are more helpful when it comes to understanding the relationship between foster children and their child welfare workers. Honneth's perspectives allow for understanding the specific interpersonal qualities in the relationships, while, importantly, also taking into account the structural and institutional conditions. The preconditions for recognition should always be understood in relation to the current political and structural surroundings. This becomes clear for instance in the understanding of the prevailing welfare system and dominating normative and cultural-cognitive expectations of professionalism (cf. Lindahl, 2018; Lindahl & Bruhn, 2018). However, as I propose above, recognition in the domain of rights implies a categorisation of the child (i.e. understanding and treating the individual child on the basis of a universal understanding of foster children as a group or aggregated category), which is counterproductive in relation to the possibility of recognising the child as a unique individual through closeness and solidarity. Therefore, Fraser's and Taylor's emphasis on the importance of understanding individuals on the basis of their group belongings would be misleading as part of the theoretical perspective in this article.

While I prefer Honneth's perspectives over those of Fraser and Taylor in this case, Honneth's definitions and theorizations do need to be problematised, adjusted and developed in order to serve as theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between foster children and their child welfare workers. Especially problematic is Honneth's dichotomy between recognition and misrecognition within the area of rights. In cases where recognition concerning rights is based on the welfare worker's universal approach and a categorisation of the child, this may induce distance and formality in their relationship. This, in turn, is an obstacle for developing awareness of uniqueness and emotional concern, and therefore also is an obstacle for recognition through closeness and solidarity. Thus, as with misrecognition, even recognition in the domain of rights may have negative effects on the relationship as a whole. In line with this, recognition in the area of rights should be understood as a dichotomy between *categorizing* or *individualizing* recognition. Categorising recognition occurs when the child is recognised as an abstract citizen belonging to the aggregated category of foster children as a group. This kind of recognition is reinforced by mutuality in the relationship, i.e. by the child's recognition of the child welfare worker as a representative of a uniform category. Individualising recognition within the domain of rights, on the other hand, is a recognition that is tailored to the needs of the unique child. Research from Sweden, and other countries, has shown that standardisation and manual-based categorisation are dominating guiding principles in contemporary social work (e.g. Skillmark & Denvall, 2018). Therefore, under these prevailing institutional conditions, an individualising recognition often demands that the welfare worker reject, or at least heavily customise, the use of manuals and other forms of categorising and universalising methods. By rejecting these kinds of standardised methods, the welfare worker is not recognising the foster child as an abstract citizen, nor is the child misrecognised or disrespected. This may, in turn, enable the child to recognise the child welfare worker as a unique individual with specific abilities to act on the basis of their mutual awareness. However, theoretically it appears to be problematic to achieve an individualising recognition under circumstances where the starting point for the relationship is recognition regarding rights. The possibility to achieve an individualising recognition through rights, should be facilitated by an institutional setting where the relationship between foster children and their child welfare workers is instead based on recognition through closeness and solidarity. This constitutes a theoretical argument that can be connected to the above-mentioned studies that indicated the importance of relationship-based social work (e.g. Munro, 2001; Ruch, 2005; Trevithick, 2003).

Concluding discussion

On the basis of empirical findings from interviews with foster children and child welfare workers, and by drawing connections with other theoretical perspectives, this article has presented how Honneth's theory of recognition can serve as an important tool for understanding the relationship between foster children and their child welfare workers. The theory is helpful in visualising the different dimensions of the relationship, and it reveals the tension between the different forms of recognition within this specific context. Other scholars have also drawn the conclusion that recognition theory provides an understanding for relationships in social work. For example, Warming (2015, p. 259) argues that Honneth's theory 'helps us understand and unfold the dynamics' of children's experiences of being overlooked. However, in the application of recognition theory some complexities are exposed, leading to the importance of problematising and further developing Honneth's definitions and descriptions. These complexities are partly related to Honneth's approach to childhood and recognition, and partly to his arguments about the importance of mutuality. Nevertheless, through the application and further development of recognition theory, two issues emerge as particularly important for understanding the relationship between foster children and their welfare workers. First, what form of recognition constitutes the starting point for the relationship, and what are the consequences of this for all three forms of recognition? Conceptual discussions in this article have highlighted that relationships based on recognition in the domain of rights tend to constrain and obstruct the possibilities to achieve recognition in the form of closeness and solidarity. Relationships that are based on closeness and emphasise the uniqueness of each child, may on the contrary enable a more constructive form of recognition in the domain of rights. Secondly, how can Honneth's dichotomy between recognition and misrecognition in the domain of rights be problematised and complemented? I have argued that when recognition in the area of rights is based on universal approaches and a categorisation of the child, it can cause distance and formality in the relationship, thereby obstructing recognition through closeness and solidarity. On the other hand, when recognition in the domain of rights is tailored to the needs of the unique child, it harmonises with the implications of recognition in the form of closeness and solidarity. In line with this, these conceptual discussions have highlighted that the opposite of misrecognition concerning rights should be understood as a dichotomy between *categorizing* or *individualizing* recognition.

Findings from the presented research project and the theoretical argumentations in this article call for further research and theorisation on how recognition theory can be used and developed to understand different forms of relationships in social work. Specific aspects of interest are to reach a deeper understanding of how recognition in the domain of rights can be more individualised, and how the tasks of child welfare workers can be embedded in an institutional setting where recognition in the form of closeness and solidarity constitutes the starting point. The conclusions in this article can be considered relevant for social work in many countries. However, since only empirical examples from the Swedish context are highlighted, research focusing on the situation in other countries would be of relevance to further support (or reject) the theoretical arguments in this article.

Note

1. The concept of functional specificity, originally formulated by Parsons (1939), refers to the notion that professionalism is about possessing and exercising universal and standardised knowledge about clients' problems and needs – that is, without emotional engagement in the uniqueness of each client.

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