

Employee recognition programmes: An immanent critique

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Abstract

In this article I present a critical reading of employee recognition programmes. I utilize an immanent approach, drawing on the same principles that it is claimed underpin such programmes, namely the desire of needful subjects for recognition in the form of self-respect and esteem, and an anticipation of the organizational relations that are themselves a prerequisite for such recognition. These principles are articulated through a reading of Axel Honneth's critical theory of intersubjective recognition as a necessary condition for what he refers to as fulfilled self-realization and social freedom. In doing so, I suggest that, rather than facilitating the conditions and benefits of intersubjective recognition, internal pathological tendencies towards *reification*, *disrespect* and *compelled identification* result in such programmes undermining the ontological conditions necessary for recognition to flourish, threatening both individual and organizational harm.

Keywords

Axel Honneth, critical theory, employee recognition programmes, pathologies, recognition, reification

Introduction

Managerial practices designed to align employees' subjectivity with the norms and values of their employing organizations have long been a focus of critical work in the field of organization studies (Ackers and Preston, 1997; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Bardon et al., 2017; Dale, 2012; Hancock, 1999; Hoedemaekers, 2010; Willmott, 1993). While some studies question the operational effectiveness of such practices for tending to operate with a reductionist understanding of the complexities of organizational subjects and the processes through which they are formed, most take to task what are considered to be their instrumental character and assault on the essential dignity and

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autonomy of the individual. Yet, as is generally the case, despite such academic critique (Parker, 2021) organizations continue to pursue policies and programmes geared towards nurturing institutionally desirable employee subjectivities in pursuit of managerially defined objectives.

A prominent example of this continuity is the constellation of ideas and practices associated with the operation of what are commonly referred to as ‘employee recognition programmes’ (ERPs). Promoted as a means of nurturing high-performance employees who display strong personal attachment to organizational aims and ambitions, ERPs are formal managerial initiatives designed to reward employees for organizationally sanctioned behaviours, achievements and attitudes and, as such, are a phenomenon of legitimate critical interest. While varying in both form and their discursive framing (Brun and Dugas, 2008), these programmes share a conception of needful subjects whose desire for respect and self-esteem can be appropriated in order to produce loyal and conscientious employees by offering largely symbolic rewards for organizationally championed behaviours and achievements (Saunderson, 2004). Indeed, from much derided employee of the month awards, to thank you emails and even celebratory events and parties, employee recognition has become big business, with scores of organizations offering everything from large-scale company award ceremonies, to integrated online recognition systems that operate across both workplace and personal social media platforms.¹

This article is written as a contribution to the ongoing critique of such practices. In doing so, however, rather than critically evaluating them solely with respect to external normative or political criteria, such as that they serve to limit individual autonomy or represent an overly invasive exercise of organizational power, both of which are undoubtably true, a more immanent approach to critique derived from the work of Adorno (1997), and latterly Honneth (2008), is adopted here. Specifically, it subjects such ERPs to a critique based on the same principles that effectively underpin such programmes, namely the existence of desiring subjects, and an anticipation of those social relations that are a prerequisite for recognition. This is articulated through Honneth’s (1996, 2012, 2014) own formulation of intersubjective recognition as a necessary condition for human growth and social progress. In doing so, it explores what happens when ERPs, formulated and implemented as an empirical practice, are evaluated against the yardstick of their own legitimating concepts and how they effectively undermine the conditions necessary for their own organizational realization.

This choice of method is dictated by two propositions. First, ERPs have been rendered increasingly immune from more established and transcendent forms of critique that are concerned primarily with judging such managerial practices for their perceived tendency to deliberately obfuscate values and normative assumptions. This arises from the observation that such programmes’ instrumentality or formal rationality is openly acknowledged and even celebrated with, for example, even august accreditation bodies, such as the UK’s Chartered Institute for Personnel Development and Investors in People, promoting the adoption of ERPs that feature ‘innovation awards’, ‘branded swag’, and ‘time for fun’ to organizational managers seeking to enforce ‘preferred culture and behaviours’ and ‘supercharge people’s performance’.²

Second, despite the negative publicity that such programmes and their underpinning values have often received, especially in popular culture,³ there appears to be widespread acceptance amongst organizational members that such practices of recognition can be considered a legitimate normative grounding for pursuing efficiencies in organizational life (Ali and Ahmed, 2009; Brun and Dugas, 2008; Nelson, 2016; Stajkovic and Luthans, 1997). Practitioner surveys like those published by consultancies such as Quantum Workplace register that most employees actually want more recognition in their workplaces, while their sheer popularity amongst not only top international Fortune 500 companies such as American Express and Qualcomm (Bradt, 2014), but equally with provincial universities and healthcare trusts in the UK, speak to their widespread

adoption and acceptance.⁴ In this sense, therefore, they appear to have become part of the everyday cultural and normative landscape of organizations – part of a system of customary understandings (Böhme, 2000) that resist the simple denunciation of another ‘opinion’ (Adorno, 2017: 31).

This is not to suggest, however, that a more transcendent and ethically informed critique is entirely absent from this article. Whatever internal and systemic contradictions might emerge through the exercise of immanent thought, one cannot entirely escape occasions when certain ideas and prescriptions jar so fundamentally with established notions of moral law and ethical life that they evoke a need for scrutiny and comment. Thus, the critique here adopts a dialectical logic that not only explores ‘the way our concepts [in this instance, recognition] are driven on in the encounter with what they express’ (Adorno, 2017: 2), but also evaluates how such concepts may lead one to question existing ways of organizing and the employee subjectivities they seek to bring into being. This approach, aims, therefore, at both logical, and normative and political critique.

The article proceeds as follows. The first half commences with a discussion of previous research on employee recognition and the analytical concepts of recognition and pathology, particularly as they have emerged in and through dialogue with the work of Axel Honneth. This leads to more extensive consideration of how the organization of work has itself come to be incorporated into theoretical accounts of recognition and Honneth’s notion of the importance of free-labour markets to its realisation. The section concludes by reiterating the primary question addressed by this article: when viewed through the critical lens of their own presuppositions using Honneth’s approach to the concept of recognition, do ERPs effectively undermine the conditions necessary for their own meaningful realization.

The second half of this article opens with a critical exploration of secondary sources that offer both discursive and operational exemplars of ERPs. While far from exhaustive, this literature provides an empirical framework for mapping out the ideational and operational character of such programmes. The next section considers this literature in the context of three primary ‘pressure-points’ of immanent critique, utilizing the pathological categories of *reification*, *disrespect* and *compelled identification* arrived at from both Honneth’s own schema, and my own critical reading of the literature. This is then followed by a critical discussion.

The conclusion summarizes the article’s content and arguments, and reflects on some of its implications. Specifically, I argue that the pathological qualities of ERPs are a matter of concern not only insofar as they distort employee subjectivity by aligning achievement of an affirmative relation-to-self with restrictive and organizationally opposed criteria, but because in doing so they also undermine many of the preconditions for achieving even minimum standards of intersubjectivity and self-understanding conducive to the mutual recognition of self and other within organizations. Finally, I also briefly consider, through the determinate negation of such programmes, the value of an extended critical theory of recognition to developing an improved understanding of the range of practices and motives associated with the management of the organizational subject.

Employee recognition in organizational research

ERPs originate in the idea that singling out employees for ‘praise or acknowledgement’ (Silverman, 2004: 3) will motivate them to identify more closely with organizational goals and values, and therefore work harder and smarter. This approach to rewarding employees focuses predominantly on furnishing them with usually small financial or symbolic rewards that acknowledge specific examples of organizationally sanctioned performance or achievement. Although such programmes are relatively widespread, interpretative and critical research on them remains relatively sparse. The research that does exist tends to utilize large-scale quantitative studies to support the largely functionalist proposition that ERPs are an efficient and cost-effective instrument for boosting

labour-force performance (Amoatema and Kyeremeh, 2016; Danish and Usman, 2010). For example, based on a quantitative survey of 254 respondents, Luthans (2000: 38) argues that acts of employee recognition are demonstrably motivational and a 'potent tool' in the managerial armoury. Similarly, Bradler et al.'s (2016) field experiment with over 300 organizational members leads them to conclude that acts of public recognition – in this instance, the distribution of 'thank you' cards – significantly improve employee endeavours.

While such studies have been largely enthusiastic about ERPs, there is less agreement surrounding the most effective means of expressing or operationalizing the principles that underpin them. As Brun and Dugas (2008: 719) observe, recognition is a somewhat 'polymorphous' and 'polysemous' concept that is not always easy to pin down in the managerial literature. Nevertheless, it is readily apparent that the majority of such schemes, and their supporters, suppose that employees respond more positively to acts and gestures of managerial approval, which may consist of anything from simple verbal and written extensions of 'thanks', to non-monetary rewards and workplace perks such as reserved car parking, company-wide awards ceremonies and even parties (Silverman, 2004), than to formalized systems that focus on pay and conditions.

Furthermore, a reading of the literature enables several unifying features characterizing an ideal type of ERP to be identified. First, as suggested above, such programmes should be considered distinct from formal organizational remuneration procedures, such as wage increments and bonus payments. ERPs often operate based on both peer and middle-manager recommendations (Fisher, 2015), and are increasingly mediated through online platforms that use mobile applications to both identify and inform potential recipients of their achievements. Second, recognition should remain largely symbolic and non-monetary, utilizing the kinds of media identified above including congratulatory emails, e-cards and social celebrations and awards. Any monetary value that is ascribed to such rewards should be immediate and indirect, for instance in the form of store vouchers, discounts or complementary access to events or shows (Mosley and Irvine, 2014). Third, recognition must reward individual achievements that are closely aligned with organizational priorities and ambitions, or employees who exhibit institutionally desired behaviours and attitudes (Deeprise, 2006). Finally, although group recognition is legitimate, recognition should ideally focus on acknowledging individual merit and accomplishments, and is therefore based on employee exceptionalism.

While these are the more formal characteristics of such programmes, equally important is a clear commitment to use them in such a way as to nurture engaged and productive organizational subjects. As has been convincingly argued in respect of previous managerial initiatives over the decades (see Parker, 2002), although such programmes may talk the talk of employee empowerment, growth and, in the case of recognition, nurturing self-esteem and confidence, they are widely promoted more for their capacity to reconcile employee desires with an overriding requirement to enhance organizational outputs and efficiencies (Brun and Dugas, 2008) and sustain competitive advantage (Mosley and Irvine, 2014).

It is such instrumentalism that has elicited one of the few critical studies of both the values and practices of ERPs. In Pfeiffer's (2016) research on what she terms 'management by recognition' in a German third-sector organization, while she pains not to avoid analyzing the multiple levels at which recognition might be experienced as an expression of meaningful workplace interactions, she explicitly highlights the instrumental role of ERPs as albeit imperfect subjectivizing technologies of employee management. This is best illustrated in her discussion of how the organization's formally established guidelines and processes closely integrate a discourse of employee recognition with an imperative to ensure that standardized criteria, practices and policies contribute primarily to a unified and visibly performed organizational culture. Described as a culture orientated towards ensuring that senior organizational members are sufficiently equipped to 'better address

performance challenges, and to make individual volunteers more manageable' (Pfeiffer, 2016: 153), this study clearly exposes the purposeful application of recognition as a resource to be defined, applied and possessed.

Yet despite Pfeiffer's (2016) promising insights, further critical evaluation of ERPs is notably underdeveloped. There are perhaps two reasons for this lack of critical engagement. First, recognition remains widely considered a universal if albeit contested good, even if there are 'no internal criteria for judging the correctness or appropriateness of such acts of ascription' (Honneth, 2012: 81). Second, as observed in the introduction, any critique that does take place tends to take a transcendent position that identifies instrumentalism as a universal wrong when it comes to coordinating productive human activities such as work. Yet leaving aside Islam's (2012: 3) valid observation that such a perspective has the potential to 'invalidate any goal-directed behaviour', its primary limitation is its tendency to leave one in something of a normative stand-off. That is, by eschewing the need to deny the underlying instrumentality of such programmes, their proponents effectively pull the rug out from under such critique, reducing it to yet another competing or opinion-based perspective struggling on a less than level playing field, given the legitimacy that such instrumentality enjoys under advanced capitalism (Habermas, 1984).

The primary objective of this article is not, therefore, simply to replicate externalized critique of ERPs as, for instance, ideological practices or acts of managerial deception. Rather, it aims to address, through a more immanent process, the question of whether such approaches to recognition can provide the preconditions for realizing such a good, or whether they are more likely to fetter such recognition owing to the pathological maldevelopments characteristic of their operation. With this in mind, the next section establishes the intellectual resources required for this endeavour by introducing Honneth's conceptualization of both recognition and pathology, and identifying and isolating the contradictions that, it will be argued, lie at the heart of such organizational programmes.

Recognition and pathology

Grounded in the critical theory of the Institute for Social Research (Horkheimer, 1975), Honneth's (1996) work presents recognition as both a medium for, and a positive outcome of, the intersubjective affirmation of one's needs and capacities by significant others in a given milieu. He argues that the pursuit and achievement of recognition are necessary conditions for the healthy and functional formation of an individual's sense of social identity and agency. He conceptualizes recognition as both emergent from and constitutive of a dialectical relationship between individual autonomy and mutual dependency, which is orientated towards the realization of an ideal state of what he terms 'social freedom' (Honneth, 2014). This is based on a Hegelian (1977) understanding of individual autonomy as something that can only be realized through extending recognition to others as equal partners in the realm of the social. Our experience of dependency is, therefore, embedded in an acknowledged desire for reciprocal recognition. This is a mutual transaction through which subjects are able to both 'reassure others and themselves of their *similarity*. . . and of their status as *distinct* individuals' (Van Den Brink and Owen, 2007: 4, *original emphasis*).

Social freedom thus emerges from this mutually secured acknowledgement of both one's individual right to autonomy, and institutionally supported recognition of one's responsibilities for and dependency on the good of the whole (Honneth, 2014). Recognition is encapsulated in a triadic, intersubjective movement between what Honneth (1996) terms practical relations-to-self, namely *self-confidence*, *self-respect* and *self-esteem*, each being mapped onto a relationship with an external mode of socially sanctioned recognition in the form of needs for *emotional support*, *respect* and *social esteem* respectively. Recognition provides the necessary condition for the formation of a

communally anchored yet autonomous sense of self-identity and agency, alongside a healthy and just polity (Honneth, 2014), both of which are required to achieve self-realization.

Not only does Honneth provide a normative framework for understanding the conditions necessary to reconcile individual autonomy and social order and justice, however. At the core of his commitment to a critical theory of society lies a concern with actively identifying those sociocultural and political ideas and practices that might impact, for good or ill, on the progress of socio-historical struggles for such recognition (Marcelo, 2013). Critical theory is, therefore, reformulated in Honneth's writings as a radical critique of *social pathologies*. These are modes of social organization and behaviour that inhibit recognition because they distort 'healthy' intersubjective relations and, in Hegelian (1977) terms, engender a state of alienation from a fully actualized self-consciousness that can only be found through a realization of our collaborative dependencies.

Such pathologies may take various forms (Klikauer, 2016; Laitinen and Särkelä, 2019), and the concept itself is not without criticism (Freyenhagen, 2015, 2018). However, its critical utility lies, here at least, in its capacity to sensitize one to how dominant modes of organizing can effectively undermine both the individual and collective pursuit of workplace recognition. This is due to their potential to distort the experience of intersubjective relations between employees and the rationality of the 'social framework' within which they take place (Honneth, 2007: 74), such as policies and practices that denigrate and marginalize those who fail to sufficiently identify with what are frequently transient organizational ambitions or priorities.

Nevertheless, Honneth does not suggest that overcoming such pathologies necessarily requires a total rejection of existing economic and institutional structures. While such pathologies do tend to flourish under capitalism, he does not consider them to reflect an irredeemable flaw in the market organization of economic relations, but rather that they can be best grasped as *immanent* deviations from the normative structures already underpinning such relations, albeit in an increasingly paradoxical form (Hartmann and Honneth, 2006). In the case of the labour market this is evident, he argues, in the contradictions that arise when employees – understood as free agents entering cooperative undertakings to rationally pursue a 'mutual satisfaction of interests' (Honneth, 2014: 249) – are treated in a way that falls short of, or deviates from, the normative implications of such an understanding. Such deviations are therefore taken to be pathologies that arise within the system of organization, such as a failure to recognize employee rights to equal treatment despite, say, one's gender or sexuality, when such recognition is in fact implicit in a labour contract that guarantees 'equality of opportunity' (Honneth, 2014: 229).

To challenge such pathologies, the critical task for Honneth (2008) is to develop an immanent critique that endeavours to make such deviations consciously explicit in society. Thus, although pathologies of the social may derive from social institutions' functional inability to sustain healthy environments for the pursuit of fulfilled self-realization, for Honneth, the point at which such pathologies become manifest, and therefore might be challenged, is where they entail a breakdown of mutual recognition. Social pathologies can be characterized, therefore, as contradictions within the structures of recognition that limit opportunities for self-realization and the intersubjective processes that underpin them, and these should be the primary object of critique.

This is not to say that one should abandon more transcendent critique as a means to engage with broader deviations from either established or presumed ethical norms. Rather, this mode of analysis needs to be extended to the contradictory institutional forms and practices that give rise to and, in turn, sustain such failures in recognition. This point is pursued further in the next section, which considers, by way of context, the small body of existing work that has sought to understand the part that recognition might play in realizing a workplace that fulfils its potential as a site of self-realization and the social freedom it necessitates.

Recognition, work and critique

A critical evaluation of organized labour is prominent in Honneth's work, and in that of several of his interlocutors. In Honneth's (2007: 75) view, paid work, in the form of 'an economically rewarding and thus socially regulated occupation', provides an important opportunity to achieve the practical relationship-to-self that underpins a healthy and autonomous subjectivity. The proper operation of free-labour markets and the organizational forms that sustain them is vital to its realization (Honneth, 2014); yet this requires institutional acknowledgement, in both idea and practice, of the conditions of mutual dependency and transactional justice integral to the rationality of cooperative labour and economic production.

For such conditions to be met in more than simply the abstract, however, Honneth argues that it is necessary for both workers and employers alike to be conscious of their labour as a genuinely cooperative undertaking and fundamental to more extensive processes of social and economic integration. It also requires 'freeing jobs on the market from merely mechanical activities that do not challenge the worker' to enable skills acquisition as the basis for experiencing meaningful social esteem (Honneth, 2014: 237). Yet even given the somewhat radical character of these requirements, especially considering the neoliberal trajectory of work and its organization, Honneth proposes that one should extend recognition congruently with the development of a healthy and practical relation-to-self through an extension of workplace reforms rather than a structural revolution of economic and social relations of production.

The idea that paid work within a market economy can provide for meaningful recognition has also been developed by several scholars in the field of management and organization studies (Hancock, 2016; Hancock and Tucker, 2020; Holtgrewe, 2001; Islam, 2012). Most notably, Islam (2012) extends Honneth's approach to identify not only how organizations' HRM function tends to objectify employees as 'human capital' to be 'utilized, developed or divested according to economic logic' (Islam, 2012: 43), but also how the necessary conditions for a relationship of recognition can be understood as immanent in the values of HRM, since employees enact their intrinsic freedom as agential subjects through being active entrants into the labour market and voluntary recruits into the organization. This confers on them a status that demands respect, esteem and thus recognition, and while the discursive reification of the employee as capital often causes HRM practitioners to 'forget' this fact, it can be reclaimed by actively returning it to the profession's consciousness.

Honneth's notion that work, as constituted within the normative parameters of a market economy, necessarily provides a rational context for intersubjective recognition is not one that is universally shared, however. According to Borman (2009) and Thompson (2016, 2019), for instance, Honneth's approach tends to marginalize the fact that many workplace pathologies are embedded in the economic and institutional structures of capitalism, and hence are not necessarily susceptible to bounded organizational reform. For others, such as Petersen and Willig (2004), Honneth also appears surprisingly ignorant of the fact that his stipulation that 'repetitive work that requires no initiative' (Honneth, 2014: 237) cannot be viewed as a medium for recognition yet is somehow susceptible to local reform, flies in the face of global labour market trends. In particular, it overlooks the tendency for employers to provide only highly automated or deskilled work for the majority, while placing intense performative pressures on those employed in more responsible roles. Hence, while the former group largely continues to be denied the level of workplace initiative and autonomy Honneth requires, the latter are little better off as they struggle less with the challenges of intersubjective recognition, and more with an isolated defence of their own ego projects in response to a demand that can never be realized; namely to be constantly effective, 'excellent' organizational subjects.

The assertion that meaningful work should not only be widely recognized as socially useful but also well remunerated (Honneth, 2014) can also be viewed as problematic when further judged against the actualities of organizational practice, especially for the kinds of organizational approaches to recognition considered here. Although Honneth is clear that symbolic recognition must be accompanied by a fulfilment of material needs for self-realization, the fact is that organizational programmes of recognition generally fall short in this respect. As will become apparent, those involved in co-opting recognition into a predominantly managerial repertoire have become increasingly adept at restricting expressions of evaluation almost solely to the level of the symbolic. They do so either by promoting such recognition as a form of reward that culturally exceeds material claims to, say, improved wages and conditions, or by repositioning symbolic rewards as entirely external, if not antagonistic, to mechanisms that ascribe material value to labour, such as formal pay negotiations and collective bargaining practices.⁵

Yet while such criticisms of Honneth are powerful, they also raise a critical concern themselves. First, as observed earlier, by virtue of simply asserting that organizational recognition, as in the form of ERPs, lacks normative credibility because it either fails to meet an external standard on employee treatment or actively pursues an ‘increase in regulative power’ (Honneth, 2012: 94), the criticism is effectively blunted when the standard against which it is itself judged celebrates these very principles. Recognition is continually championed as an efficient approach to employee management precisely because it is considered cheap and instrumentally effective (Novak, 2016: 58) while also appearing to be widely accepted as providing a legitimate, and even welcome, normative grounding for organizational life.

Second, targeting Honneth’s conception of recognition for critique, albeit in the context of workplace organization, presents the view that recognition is too easily appropriated in the service not of emancipation, but of the legitimacy of organizational hierarchies based on ‘domination, control and subordination’ (Thompson, 2019: 15). However, while this view is undoubtedly partially true, it overlooks the potentially critical capacity to interrogate such everyday acts of appropriation against immanent expectations that necessarily underpin recognition, in whatever form and in whoever’s interests. And it is this observation which leads back to a slight reformulation of the question, or rather now a proposal and a question, driving this article. This is, to critically evaluate not only whether currently dominant managerial and organizational approaches to employee recognition in fact undermine the necessary conditions for such recognition in the workplace, but also whether, in doing so, the concept of recognition that underpins them and that is most fully developed in Honneth’s work remains the best resource for undertaking such a critique.

Employee recognition

In this section, the various ways in which recognition is both understood and enacted through ERPs are considered through a review of existing literature that either engages with such programmes from an academic perspective or formulates and champions ERPs as appropriate media for employee engagement and the pursuit of productivity. As such, it provides the requisite object of immanent critique developed later in the article with what follows being an empirical consideration, through a close reading of the primary and secondary literature, of the ideational and implementational contours of such programmes as self-professed technologies of employee management.

Common to all published material concerned with ERPs, and particularly that taking a managerial approach, is a simple but appealing claim that by attending to recognition of employees within an organization, managers can ‘motivate people, gets results and feed the soul’ (Novak, 2016: xiv). As such, the organizational value of positively recognizing workplace performance is

widely celebrated throughout the literature, with ERPs considered to be an important mechanism for operationalizing this principle (Brun and Dugas, 2008). Brought into being through both a range of discursive resources, such as ‘How To. . .’ texts and websites, empirical studies and recognition software packages, as well as in situ organizational programmes and initiatives that extend offers of recognition directly into employees’ working lives, ERPs are considered an existentially rewarding means of engendering beyond-contract commitment and enhancing organizational value to reduce the costs traditionally associated with such ambitions.

For example, in Mosley and Irvine’s bestselling book on the organizational value of ERPs, their objectives and beliefs are stated unequivocally as that of creating ‘*new value* in the forms of goodwill, loyalty, employee engagement, and personal meaning’, and that ‘*value brings tangible benefits such as greater profits and also drives strategic objectives* of a modern organization’ (Mosley and Irvine, 2014: xiv, *emphasis added*). In practice, the authors argue that successful ERPs begin with small acts of praise, akin to ‘placing a “like” notice’ on an employee’s Facebook page’, and ideally culminate in what they describe as mass mobilization of gratitude through cost-effective ‘social technologies’ that enable employers to generate value simply by saying ‘thanks’ (Mosley and Irvine, 2014: xv). To this end, the organization behind this publication has recently redefined itself as an online provider of recognition services called *Workhuman*.⁶ It claims to deliver ‘the world’s fastest-growing integrated social recognition and continuous performance management platform’, with clients including LinkedIn, for which it has developed a global recognition programme called ‘Bravo’ that awards both recognition points and rewards in real time.⁷ *Workhuman*’s cloud-based applications are designed to allow managers to establish what is described as a more quantitatively rigorous approach to recognition that is purportedly able to respond to individuals’ workplace performance and therefore ensuring ‘the correct volume of reach, frequency and value of social recognition’.⁸

Use of such IT-driven programmes is not restricted to social media organizations such as LinkedIn, however. Global electric utility company E.ON, for example, utilizes its own online recognition portal, ‘Buzz’⁹ to send thank-you e-cards in recognition of any action considered helpful to customers or to other employees. A similar approach is favoured by professional services and audit firm, Deloitte, whose internal recognition programme, ‘Deloitte Dots’, provides not only symbolic recognition but also a low-cost, points-based reward scheme through which employees can trade in ‘points for prizes’ such as experience vouchers or charity donations.¹⁰ Again, this is tied to an IT-based ‘recognition management system’ closely integrated with the company’s performance monitoring more generally.

An example of academic research on the operation of such online systems in situ is Smith’s (2014) study of a UK insurance company’s ERP. Called ‘Sparkle’, this programme is described by its designers as a low-cost means of promoting ‘organizationally desirable behaviours’ (Smith, 2014: 122). It combines an informal online system, through which employees can send e-cards to thank colleagues whom they feel have ‘performed particularly well’ (Smith, 2014: 106), with a more formal system through which colleagues and managers can nominate each other for a ‘Sparkle’ award. Awards include not only congratulatory emails, but also, subject to line manager approval, non-cash benefits such as retail gift vouchers.

However, underpinning all these programmes is a consistent, reiterated claim that in extending recognition to employees, whether through e-cards, ceremonies or small gifts, it is important to focus on encouraging productive workplace behaviours that reinforce core organizational values and desired employee attributes.¹¹ According to one effusive ‘Engagement Practice Manager’ cited in Mosley and Irvine (2014), when it comes to finding a ‘supple and powerful’ way to manage culture, ‘The powerful thing about recognition is that it *reminds people of what matters most*. This is a key part of engagement – to redirect employee effort and attention to *the top priorities of the*

organization' (p. 79, *emphases added*). The potential impact of this on employees is illustrated in Smith's (2014) discussion of the attitude of one individual to receiving a 'Sparkle' award. Recipients were entitled to a small non-monetary reward, yet for this employee the most important thing was receiving a personal congratulatory email from the manager who had recommended her for the award, which she had pinned on her noticeboard so she could 'look at it everyday' (Smith, 2014: 112). This example is particularly telling in how the programme seemingly encourages the recipient to internalize the recognition, positioning herself as a viable organizational subject only perhaps insofar as she could now 'conform to the professional image imposed upon her by the manager' and 'experience the email as a symbol of her endorsement of the values and assumptions of the organization' (Smith, 2014: 113, *emphasis added*).

Despite the examples given above, it would be misleading to consider such programmes as popular only in the global private sector. Public and hybrid institutions, such as NHS Trusts across the UK, are increasingly adopting similar ERPs as part of the rise of so-called new public management (Lane, 2000). Illustrative examples include the Shropshire Community Health Trust's 'Staff Recognition Scheme' and the 'Make a Difference' programme run by Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, both of which award thank you cards, certificates and even badges to employees for demonstrating 'hard work and dedication'.¹² Another is the Excellence Award publicized by the University of Essex, which is concerned with celebrating 'excellence in research' by recognizing individuals across the institution who are deemed to be 'champions' or 'outstanding' in their field. Recipients gain not only symbolic recognition, but also additional funds to help pursue their research, even though such activity is already a pre-existing institutional obligation and contractual requirement.¹³

Yet while there are notable similarities in programmes across most organizations, employees can respond to them in various ways. For instance, Pfeiffer's (2016) study of a voluntary organization reveals more employee scepticism about managerial-led practices of recognition than in Smith's (2014) study of a private insurance company. The underlying reason for such scepticism seemed to be either direct rejection of the legitimacy of those bestowing recognition on them to do so, or more general dismissal of the whole process itself as 'superficial, . . . inauthentic, [or] too strategic' (Pfeiffer, 2016: 187). Similarly, Smith's (2014: 151) examination of the management of employee recognition in UK local government shows a more evident 'culture of suspicion', as she terms it, operating amongst such staff. Although apparently driven by various factors, and by no means universal across the organization, many employees believed that public displays of recognition were more concerned with organizational identity work than with genuinely affirming the contributions and sacrifices of staff, for example through meaningful increases in pay or operational autonomy. As one of Smith's (2014: 153) interviewees put it:

I think ultimately, it's more of a PR scheme for the Council, to get paper coverage and the rest of it, than it is for the individual, to actually show genuine appreciation for individuals and groups.

Recognition contra employee recognition

That ERPs are not always greeted with credulity by those subject to them should perhaps not come as too great a surprise. Nonetheless, beyond this realization, what should scholars attached to a more radical conception of recognition make of such programmes? Perhaps the obvious temptation is to declare, as suggested above, that even on their own terms they simply do not work, and that employees are generally too savvy to be seduced by them, especially given the structured antagonisms that continue to define the employment relationship (Edwards, 1986). As it stands, however, there is insufficient evidence to support such a proposition. Although studies

occasionally suggest that ERPs may reduce the motivation of select groups of high performers (e.g. Gubler et al., 2016), the bulk of the empirical literature considered so far suggests quite the opposite, with interviewees such as those cited above being outliers. Equally, the simple fact of their popularity amongst leaders of organizations, ranging from fast food outlets to hospitals and universities, suggests that they retain significant credibility amongst both managers and the broader workforce.

A second strand of critique might be to consider ERPs as simply an extension to a managerial ideology that is instrumental in both ethos and practice. Like so many faux self-actualization approaches before it, ranging from pyramidal psychology (Maslow, 1943) to Reeves and Leighton Read's (2009) take on gamification, recognition certainly appears to have been readily adapted to translate the norms of individual and social reproduction into performative, system-orientated variables (Habermas, 1984, 1987), based on meeting targets, company objectives or the requirement to regularly embody and express the company ethos. However, while there is much to commend such a view, it is limited by its aforementioned failure to acknowledge what is often the normative embedding of recognition in the very fabric of organizational practices, as well as the quite unabashed instrumental language of its managerial exponents.

In contrast to both approaches, this article offers a critical analysis of the claims and practices associated with employee recognition in general, and ERPs in particular. It applies the principles underpinning these programmes, as articulated through Honneth's (2012) theory of intersubjective recognition, as a standard against which to evaluate them. Rather than simply dismissing such programmes as so much ideological flotsam, it therefore takes the idea of employee recognition seriously, while unravelling pathological maldevelopments internal to its managerial appropriation that risk undermining both the ontological and normative foundations on which the possibility of recognition rests.

Recognition as reification

The starting point for this critical analysis is how such programmes might be considered reificatory, thus undermining their own claims to rationality and an ability to offer meaningful recognition of employees' abilities and contributions. The concept of reification has played a significant role in critical theory, and particularly in Honneth's (2008) approach to analysing recognition. Drawing on Lukács (1972) and Adorno and Horkheimer's (1973: 230) observation that 'all reification [objectification] is a forgetting', for Honneth, reification describes a pathological condition in which what is 'forgotten' is our fundamental dependence on others for our own status as agential subjects. Specifically, this is a reification of what Honneth (2008) calls antecedent recognition – our initial openness to and dependence on 'the other' from whom our very sense of selfhood emerges. This is exhibited whenever, for example, we fail to be attentive to others as interlocutors in the act of mutual recognition, often by cognitively distorting their status and instead relating to them as calculable resources in the service of our advancement, or by denying the richness and multiplicity of their personhood by identifying them with a stereotype based on a particular or singular characteristic (Honneth, 2008).

In management and organization studies, the concept of reification is particularly prominent in Islam's (2012: 38) aforementioned recognition-based 'critical ethics perspective'. This calls on HRM practitioners to 'remember' the standards of recognition demanded of them by virtue of the fact that employees are voluntary entrants into the labour market and should be accorded the rights and esteem befitting their autonomy and common humanity, rather than simply as an organizational resource. Yet while there is much to commend the concept of remembering as the basis for a more normatively guided HRM practice, it is less clear whether it might also speak to employee

recognition and its emphasis on the ascription of esteem, as discussed here. While it would be disingenuous to argue against the view that such remembering can be formally embedded in management practices that emphasize ‘social respect, autonomy and belongingness’ (Islam, 2012: 44), the predominantly symbolic programmes under discussion here are still likely to exacerbate processes of reification, whatever the ambition. This is because the objects of such programmes remain individualized and exceptional organizational subjects and their particularized achievements and merits. As such, any ‘remembering’ that does occur is not of the prerequisite interdependency of subjectivity, but rather ‘the antagonistic, competitive and unequal dimensions of recognition’ (Heinich, 2009: 103) embedded in the notion of individual exceptionalism. Achievement, and the social esteem accorded it, are therefore abstracted from the relations of sociality that make any such achievements possible while work, as a form of mutual social praxis, is itself ‘forgotten’.

Nor is it simply the tendency of such programmes to perpetuate the forgetting of employees’ ‘associate efforts’ (Honneth, 2014: 231) as both economic and social agents that generates a reificatory outcome. In doing so, they also constitute recognition less as a process of mutual attentiveness – as an associative, intersubjective outcome – and more as an object or property to be individually coveted and possessed. This is captured, for example, in how such programmes are frequently ascribed an ontological solidity through names such as ‘Dazzle’ or ‘Sparkle’, which are then further objectified through endless certificates, trophies, photoshoots and ceremonial rituals. This results in a further distortion of what Honneth (1996) would term the moral grammar of recognition as the dialectical relationship between recognition as both an intersubjective process, and a normative ideal, is increasingly alienated from the lifeworld of reciprocity the more it is reduced to something to be quantified, owned and displayed.

ERPs are therefore subject to the contradictions of an organizational system that relies on externalizing employees from the mutual obligations and supporting networks that enable them not only to achieve institutional goals, but also to engage in social integration more widely (Honneth, 2012). Just as importantly, such employees are likely to be further alienated from such activities by virtue of the performative demands for recognition placed on them in the workplace as the symbolism of organizational recognition itself becomes an increasingly dominating aspiration. Such reification, of both employees who are recognized solely as organizationally achieving subjects/objects, and of the social basis of labour that is ‘forgotten’ as a medium of communal integration, represents both a structural and a cognitive pathology. In disremembering organizational and broader social solidarities, it ultimately undermines the very conditions of socially cooperative labour that enable not only mutual recognition, but also the organizational achievements that ERPs claim to recognize.

Disrespect

A further contradiction arises in the interrelationship between self-respect, based on a provision of universal rights, and the particularity associated with the ascription of organizational esteem (McBride, 2013; Petersen and Willig, 2004; Smith, 2009). For Honneth, self-respect emerges primarily from the possession of rights that are universally applied and recognized, underpinned by law or similar institutionalized systems that acknowledge ‘every human individual as a free being’ (Honneth, 1996: 110). Similarly, in organizational settings, contracts of employment establish employees as having both responsibilities and rights within legally constituted contractual relationships.

Yet given the quality and limitations of ERPs, employee recognition appears to have little if anything to do with extending or recognizing formal organizational rights. This is perhaps most evident in the fact that ERPs are an almost entirely symbolic solution to the question of employee

engagement, apparently requiring little or no formal commitment beyond a thank you and perhaps a token gift (Bradler et al., 2016; Danish and Usman, 2010; Luthans, 2000; Pfeiffer, 2016; Silverman, 2004; Smith, 2014). 'Entirely symbolic' refers not only to having to pay employees more, but also encapsulates the ideal that no potential costs will be incurred in extending any additional organizational rights to employees by virtue of their performance, such as greater occupational autonomy or authority. Indeed, as a closer reading of much of the literature previously referred to suggests, such programmes are actively distanced from the extension of such rights because what is formally argued to be their largely transactional and long-term quality precludes them from having the more relational and immediate impact of recognition.¹⁴

Certainly, in none of the programmes explored by Smith (2014) and Pfeiffer (2016), nor indeed in any of those publicized, marketed and promoted across a range of literatures and organizations, is there any suggestion that anything other could, or indeed should be the case. This is not simply the outcome of a parsimonious economic rationality at work, as one might assume, however. Indeed, much of the literature stresses that extending organizational rights, for example through traditional paths such as promotion, is important, but is not part of an ERP. Rather, so as to appear legitimate in their claims to acknowledge and reward exceptional performance, ERPs are restricted to a framework of practice in which individualized evaluative distinctions between subjects must be made. Conceptualizing recognition as particularity leaves, therefore, little room for a universalistic notion of right in that any acknowledgement of universalism would be logically irreconcilable with the celebration of exceptionalism for which such programmes ostensibly exist.

Having said this, even if one were able to set aside the qualification of universalism, there is no evidence to suggest that extending employees' rights, for example with freedom to challenge or alter their own substantive workplace practices in order to realize the abilities for which they have been recognized, plays any part in the operation of such programmes (Schaub and Odigbo, 2019). Thus, rather than receiving the material prerequisites for an increased sense of self-respect or autonomy, the best employees can perhaps hope for is an opportunity to 'feign initiative, flexibility and talents [with] no material basis for doing so' (Honneth, 2012: 93). This is because recognition remains predominantly symbolic, as illustrated by Smith (2014) and Pfeiffer (2016) and reinforced by the underlying principle of recognition without cost or change.

The consequence is not simply a disconnect between what is promised in the act of recognition and the lack of material support to allow the skills being celebrated to be fully realized, however. It also has pathological implications for employee well-being, in that those subjected to it are almost inevitably forced to reflect on their apparent failure, as a perceived consequence of their own insufficient ability or effort, to consistently achieve the recognized standard of work now expected of them (Cremin, 2010). Such introspection, as Petersen and Willig (2004: 347) observe, not only isolates individuals psychologically, but also draws them out of the sphere of intersubjectivity as the burden of responsibility for this ongoing 'failure' is deemed to rest solely on their shoulders, frequently resulting in stress, fatigue and emotional and psychological suffering as their sense of self-respect is diminished.

Recognition as compelled identification

The final pathology resonates with what Klikauer (2016) describes as pathological mass-recognition and is referred to here as compelled over-identification. This is a pathology that both underpins and arises from a situation in which intersubjective recognition is substituted with a 'mass mediated form of false recognition based on symbols and signs as a medium between two entities' (Klikauer, 2016: 44). Klikauer focuses on such false recognition as the likely consequence of compelled relationships between organizational leaders or figureheads and their employees,

whereas the concern here is with how culturally mediated approaches to organizational identification produce similar outcomes. A primary function of organizational identity projects and initiatives has long been to compel employees' over-identification with the ethos of the employing organization (Willmott, 1993). This is frequently mobilized around a desire for recognition through an extension of meaning that, however selective, effectively coerces individuals' aspiration for self-realization into narrowly and externally approved characteristics and behaviours.

For Honneth, such attempts to seek recognition through the apparently relentless pursuit of externally established organizational goals and ambitions result in what he identifies as a form of 'self-reification', whereby we 'deny that our desires, feelings and intentions are worthy of articulation' (Honneth, 2008: 82). Subjected to organizational claims surrounding actions and values through which we might achieve esteem and recognition, employees are gradually emptied of any antecedent recognition of their own desires and ambitions, as they which are gradually driven to become identical with those set out before them. For example, in job interviews, applicants are increasingly required to portray not only expertise, but also their own 'feelings and attitudes' as willingly 'manipulable things', in order to be seen to align with organizational expectations surrounding a desire for 'fit' and to become company men or women (Honneth, 2008: 83). To describe such processes of self-reification as pathological is therefore to directly invoke a pathology as something that may not only disrupt or 'infect' social relations but may also strike at the heart of the creative vitality of the subject whereby objective social formations are internalized, as one might indeed internalize a pathogen (Laitinen and Särkelä, 2019).

While the example of job interviews is telling, it should not require too great a leap of the imagination to visualize how ERPs may result in similar outcomes. Designed to align recognition practices with, as already observed, 'the top priorities of the organization' (cited in Mosley and Irvine, 2014: 79), their impact is both to 'encourage an individual relation-to-self that suits the existing dominant order' (Honneth, 2012: 86), and attenuate one's capacity to act as a self-desiring subject leaving one unable to recognize little beyond an organizationally sponsored metric of esteem and achievement. For instance, where the organizational metric insists on 'excellence', which is itself measured against an externally posited and abstract standard, the measure of both one's own and others' worth is reified in that we forget to be attentive to our own antecedent desires and others' qualities and acts of agency. Such a pathology of compelled over-identification results in a situation in which:

We end up reifying our inner states, either believing that we can instrumentally remake ourselves in the interest of selling ourselves to others, or [we believe] that our inner states can be calculatingly reduced to standardized schemas or categories, thereby locating ourselves in an abstract grid of personality types (Zurn, 2015: 109).

Once again, the very sociality of recognition and its realization through work not only becomes a semblance of what it might be, but also threatens to undermine the vitality of the creative lifeworld relations on which work itself, as an act of both intersubjective cooperation and collective innovation, depends.

Discussion

Despite the ubiquity of ERPs, and the professed concern of those championing them to nurture an organizational culture of mutual recognition, albeit in a limited and instrumental form, in this article I have argued that they display several pathological characteristics that undermine the conditions under which recognition might actually be realized. This is because such programmes fail to

acknowledge the normative preconditions for creative and cooperative work and, in doing so, impede employees' self-realization and rational social integration. In developing this argument, I have established three critical propositions in the hope of making a meaningful contribution to the ongoing evolution of a critical theory of contemporary organizational practices.

First, despite claims that ERPs seek to engender a mutually supportive culture of recognition and self-realization, they cannot meaningfully honour this claim by virtue of the reificatory and therefore pathological distortions that characterize them. Focussing predominantly on individual talents and achievements obscures the mutual social praxis and societal labour, both internal and external to the organizational setting, that underpin work. Therefore, employees are ostensibly led to 'forget' their intersubjective interdependency and instead adopt an isolated, 'self-absorbed, self-reflecting' (Dale, 2012: 23) monadic subjectivity. At the same time, and through the same processes, employees risk becoming increasingly disconnected from the wider recognition practices through which, as subjects, they might 'seek to realize their individual freedom in the experience of commonality' (Honneth, 2014: 62) with family, friends and community.

This individualization of achievement and its celebration as an organizational good cut against the pursuit of those social solidarities and integration on which recognition, in any meaningful form, relies. However, this has negative implications not purely for relations of intraorganizational sociality. The very notion that institutional esteem may require even greater sacrifice in the service of organizational ambitions resurrects the ghost of Whyte's (1960) 'organization man' (sic). It generates a potentially hypertrophic relationship with the self, and isolation and alienation from integrative activities external to work, which in turn contribute to individual emotional and psychological suffering alongside structural fragmentation of the lifeworld institutions and rational practices of social integration on which organizations inevitably depend.

Equally problematic are both the reification of the organizational form as something ontologically incapable of bestowing recognition, and how this reduces recognition to the category of a property ascribed to individual entities distinct from any antecedent intersubjective relationship. Indeed, reducing recognition to a thing-like status, capable of being bequeathed, possessed and displayed, conflates it with the often aesthetic qualities and pathos (Gagliardi, 1992) of artefacts such as certificates, badges and ceremonies that, as acknowledged across the literature, cost little and, more importantly, require little genuine affective investment by those bestowing them. Consequently, such awards perpetuate at best a 'ritualized admiration' (cited in Holtgrewe, 2001: 40) shorn of actual recognition, and at worst an infantilized dependency (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1973) on institutionalized and predominantly reified performance measurements that merely compensate for the social isolation they perpetuate.

Second, while there is a fundamental tension in Honneth's (1996) own ideas regarding the relationship between *esteem* as an acknowledgement of particular attributes, and *respect*, which relies on a universal conception of right, this is reconciled as part of the wider dialectical process of recognition. However, this reconciliation is not apparent in the principles and practice of ERPs. For by reducing recognition to a particularized acknowledgement of individuals' achievements or exceptionalism, the possibility of extending employees' rights in reward for organizational performance is rendered unworkable by the universal quality of right itself (Hegel, 1991). This, in turn, leaves organizational subjects who desire such recognition cognitively vulnerable to ideological reconciliation with an organization that, while symbolically celebrating their achievements, subjects them to conditions and expectations that frequently render its further achievement unlikely owing to lack of rights to, for example, greater autonomy or the requisite material resources required to freely pursue it. In such cases, the burden of intensified effort with little material or cultural support is placed on individualized employees who, while desiring the 'outstanding' achievements associated with such recognition, increasingly find themselves deprived of the

necessary opportunities to excel as the organization incorporates their efforts into what becomes 'new norm' (Cremin, 2010).

Third, what is referred to here as a pathology of compelled over-identification suggests a further pathological relationship that focuses on imposed identification not only between mutually recognizing agential subjects, but between employees and the organization on which they are required to increasingly rely. Resonating with a host of well-established managerial strategies orientated towards generating employee identification (see Parker, 2000), ERPs can be approached in this context as an extension to an assortment of cultural technologies designed to address the desire for recognition by reconciling individual aspirations for identity, achievement and acknowledgement within a unifying organizational narrative of community, purpose and excellence. In addition to more obvious criticisms, such as those referred to above surrounding the potential one-dimensionality (Marcuse, 1964) engendered by such relations, these can also generate a pathological experience of what Honneth (2008) refers to as self-reification. In this process, individuals' identity projects are themselves effectively 'forgotten' as their sense of self becomes swamped in striving for, and continually failing to meet, externalized criteria of excellence and merit. This results in subjects emptied of their own sense of autonomy as they lose attentiveness to their hopes and desires, viewing themselves merely as objects to be strategically and instrumentally aligned with externalized priorities. Thus, the desire for recognition leads not to greater individual and social freedom, but rather to a 'complicity with [one's] own oppression' (McBride, 2013: 39).

Yet beyond the observation that ERPs fail to achieve the standards of rationality they seem to profess, and are likely to undermine rather than attain the 'modes of conduct' and 'institutional circumstances' (Honneth, 2012: 93) required to nurture the intersubjective relations on which recognition depends, what can be concluded in respect of the possible impact of such pathologies on both organizational and individual well-being? With regard to the former, it seems inevitable that as the pursuit of organizationally sanctioned forms of recognition expands, so too will the inability of any organization to continually satisfy this desire without either undermining its intimate relationship with the concept of exceptionalism or exacerbating a forgetting of colleagues as anything other than institutional competitors and objects incapable of being recognized as mutual bearers of social approval (Honneth, 1996). And while this might appear to be a moral question about the operation of such programmes, it also has potentially disruptive political consequences. As Honneth (1996) argues, where recognition has been felt to be denied and its moral grammar violated, the outcome has historically been largely a sense of outrage and a motive for both moral and political struggles, often extending to a questioning of the systemic organization of recognition itself and the legitimacy of the structures of institutional power sustaining it (Honneth, 2012).

As for the latter, the research previously cited suggests that for most recipients of ERPs their experience generally appears to be positive, with many considering it to represent a genuine affirmation of the esteem in which they are held. However, aspects other than simply the level of credibility subjectively ascribed to such programmes may also need to be considered. It is equally possible, for instance, to conceptualize the harm that such programmes may inflict as an objective state indirectly experienced by all those engaged in intersubjective relations in environments where showing attentiveness to the mutual desire for recognition by others is increasingly conceptualized as a self-defeating stratagem. When recognition is portrayed as an exclusive or relatively limited resource, it essentially amounts to claiming that to succeed in achieving one's desire, one must reduce the 'other' to an object status that is at best utilized, and at worst defeated, in a mutual struggle (Hegel, 1977) for individualized indicators of achievement and esteem.

Deprived, therefore, of their status as autonomous and needful subjects by those from whom they also seek recognition, employees are not only reduced to mere objectivity, but are also drawn into a cyclical and dehumanizing forgetting of their own 'partnership' in acts of recognition. This

results in hollowed-out subjects driven increasingly by their desire to be recognized through a ‘casting off’ of their own selfhood, subsuming their antecedent desires, hopes and aspirations to align themselves ever more fully with those of their organization. Yet, with their reliance on so many ambiguous concepts such as ‘excellence’ or ‘flexibility’, this approach to recognition denies even this possibility either due to fleeting and ethereal organizational standards against which whatever one does is never excellent enough, or to incremental organizational demands for ever greater performance following a given success. Similar in tenor to Cremin’s (2010: 139) argument pertaining to employability, this is an ultimately self-destructive ‘game of perpetual catch-up to the vicissitudes of capitalist appropriation’, whereby the pursuit of recognition can never be sustainable because our endeavours can never be continually exceptional.

Yet despite the somewhat pessimistic tenor of this discussion, several slightly more positive lessons might be drawn from what has been argued. Firstly, and perhaps changing tack somewhat, the very fact that recognition, particularly as formulated by Honneth (1996), is used as a yardstick to critique such programmes suggests that contrary to the views of some of its critics (Borman, 2009; Petersen and Willig, 2004; Thompson, 2016, 2019) that it suffers from an overly subjectivist or idealist ontology, it retains utility for the ongoing evolution of a critical theory of organizations. In particular, and as I have attempted to demonstrate here, it can contribute to an understanding of how ERPs, along with similar managerial initiatives, can serve to fragment and appropriate organizational subjects specifically when they offer individual self-realization, but only within the parameters and ambitions established in accordance with ‘organizational values and talent strategy’ (SHRM/Globoforce, 2018: 4).

Secondly, while such critique may appear overly orientated towards negating the credibility of such programmes, as Honneth (2012: 94) himself observes, the possibility remains that ‘the gap between an evaluative promise and its material fulfilment is merely a temporary one’, and that critique might itself produce a more determinate negation of the object in question. Thus, being forced through such critique to face the contradictions and potentially destructive implications of an instrumental, and therefore limited, colonization of recognition’s capacity for subjective growth may yet inspire some level of rational reflection by proponents and practitioners. And while far from assured under the prevailing socioeconomic and indeed ontological constrictions of capitalism (Curry, 2020), such individualizing programmes of organizational recognition may yet evolve into something that genuinely embraces and remunerates wider acts of social reproduction that make individual and organizational excellence possible. Alternatively, they may yet learn to recognize achievement and merit not simply by offering empty signifiers, but rather by ensuring genuine opportunities and material support for autonomy and self-governance to all those responsible for the common endeavours of organizational life. If that were to be the case then recognition, as both the subject and object of organizational understanding, might indeed become a medium for releasing opportunities for both self-realization and social freedom in the organizational workplace.

Conclusion

This article has presented a critical analysis of the organizational management of recognition in the form of ERPs. By applying the concept of recognition as the intersubjective acknowledgement of the rights and contributions of others, particularly as developed through a reclamation of Axel Honneth’s critical theory, I have suggested that such programmes display several pathological characteristics that thwart the ontological convictions necessary for recognition to flourish as both an organizational and individual good. Described as *reification*, *disrespect* and *compelled identification*, these pathologies emerge as a result of contradictions between a concept that it is claimed

acknowledges and celebrates the creative energies of cooperative labour, and an organizational system focussed on the instrumental pursuit of value creation.

While not exhaustive, the pathologies outlined here effectively infect (to continue the metaphor) the conditions and benefits derived from intersubjective recognition by either restricting, or alienating, the intersubjective and institutional sources of agency, autonomy and self-realization integral to its enactment. By doing so, rather than bringing about recognition, ERPs reproduce the reality of a programmatic attempt to limit organizational subjects to a narrowly defined path of imposed, and therefore inauthentic, self-realization and achievement, disrupting the emergence of healthy agential subjects. As such, they serve to undermine the ontological conditions necessary for their own realization and the creative, cooperative and committed organizational subjects they claim to desire.

Nevertheless, in conducting this analysis and making these arguments, I have attempted to suggest that by embracing recognition not simply as an object of enquiry but as a critical resource that can be mobilised in order to identify and illuminate the contradictions immanent in such managerial exercises, it may yet be possible to identify two other matters of importance. First, despite criticism of Honneth's conception of recognition for being too closely tied to an idealist ontology and a reformist organizational agenda – and thus vulnerable to practices of systematic appropriation as perhaps illustrated largely indirectly by artefacts such as the ERPs under discussion here – this need not be the case. Rather, it can continue to provide a framework within which the antinomies and contradictions of systems of recognition that serve not to constitute empowered organizational subjects, but rather more closely bind them to externalized priorities and duties, can be critically evaluated. Second, this opens up possibilities for the public unravelling of such contradictions through critical theory, which may yet bring about a meaningful reflection on the priorities and practices associated with such organizational activities, as well as providing a basis for further research and critique.

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Notes

1. <https://snacknation.com/blog/employee-recognition-software/>
2. <https://www.investorsinpeople.com/knowledge/20-reward-and-recognition-ideas-for-apprentices/>; <https://events.cipd.co.uk/events/blog/a-checklist-for-employee-recognition/>; <https://www.investorsinpeople.com/knowledge/20-reward-and-recognition-ideas-for-apprentices/>
3. For example, the 2006 comedy film, *Employee of the Month* (directed by G. Coolidge), or a host of *Dilbert* (S. Adams) cartoons.
4. <https://marketing.quantumworkplace.com/hubfs/Marketing/Website/Resources/PDFs/Recognition-in-the-Workplace.pdf?hsCtaTracking=15652ca6-d4d5-466b-ac11-c18ac6ecc98f%7C7f3ee571-9558-43f2-952c-a35fbff542d0>; <https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/sas2/about/staff-recognition-scheme>; <https://www.shropscommunityhealth.nhs.uk/content/doelib/12629.pdf>
5. A recent example of this is the high esteem professed for health and social care workers around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic, which appears to sit quite comfortably alongside well-documented inadequacies not only in their pay, but also in a lack of state investment in the personal protective equipment required to undertake their duties safely. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/27/german-doctors-pose-naked-in-protest-at-ppe-shortages>
6. <https://www.workhuman.com>

7. <https://employeebenefits.co.uk/exclusive-linkedin-culture-retention/>
8. <https://www.workhuman.com>
9. <https://www.eonbuzz.co.uk/Login.aspx?ReturnUrl=%2f>
10. <https://www2.deloitte.com/ie/en/pages/careers/articles/life-deloitte.html>
11. <https://employeebenefits.co.uk/good-reward-recognition-scheme-look-like/>
12. <https://www.imperial.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/feedback-compliments-and-complaints/make-a-difference>
13. <https://www.essex.ac.uk/staff/celebrating-excellence-awards>
14. <https://reba.global/content/why-praise-and-appreciation-are-worth-more-than-a-pay-rise>

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