

# Understanding and Theorizing the Pursuit of Intersubjective Recognition

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The term “identity” embraces an indispensable presence in the cultural, political, and economic spheres, but it also risks being essentialized, misunderstood, or quickly dismissed. The same trend goes for a related concept, “recognition.” This paper sets out to clarify those concepts. We wrestle with a main question: how can we understand identity and recognition in light of authentic emancipatory pursuit without essentialization and reification? Drawing insights primarily from the critical theories of Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, we attempt to connect the conception of identity and recognition to an intersubjective and dialogic theory of justice. On the intersubjective and normative plane, identity and recognition are no longer picture-like and individualistic concepts, but deeply grounded in existential/ethical/moral concerns, and social solidarity. This theoretical reconstruction is put in dialogue with a moment of misrecognition from a critical ethnographic study situated in a diversity education classroom.

**KEYWORDS**

identity, recognition, mis-recognition, redistribution, social justice, critical theory, intersubjectivity

*I cannot be properly self-conscious (recognize myself) except in the context of a recognition structure that is reciprocal; insofar as I am recognized by those I recognize.*

Robert Brandom (2019)

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Apart from being an enduring subject in philosophy, the term “identity” experiences an accelerated proliferation in the modern time. Social theorists, modernists, postmodernists and criticalists alike, have attempted to account for this evolution against the backdrop of a global capitalist society. Modernity, demarcated from “traditional” order, imposes profound reorganization of space and time facilitated by mass media and technology. The “dialectical interplay of the local and the global” (Giddens, 1991, p. 5) de-stabilizes traditional roles, and forces individuals to negotiate diverse and plural possibilities of lifestyles and interpretation of the self (Gergen, 1991; Giddens, 1991). Meanwhile, modernity propelled by its evolving capitalist engine, has adopted an unbalanced instrumental orientation to produce, differentiate, commodify, and exploit (Habermas, 1984). Then neoliberalism, or what David Harvey calls “creative deconstruction”, further rips the mind and body open across the globe to privatization and financial marketization. This is often camouflaged in the names of “entrepreneurial freedom” and so-called “individual rights” (Arfken, 2018; Harvey, 2007, p. 22).

In this context, while modernity has accelerated difference, fluidity, plurality and complexity of the self and identity, it simultaneously excludes, alienates, and marginalizes people and groups perpetuated by institutionalized patterns of hierarchies and dominance (Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Giddens, 1991, Sloan, 1996). All of those continuously unfold against the backdrop of the historical and transnational interpenetration amongst capitalism, global white supremacy, racism, patriarchy, imperialism, and post/colonialism (Bhatia, 2017; Cooper, 2015; Mills, 2015; Mohanty, 2003). This broad contextualization sets the sociological stage for our focus on meta-concepts such as identity and recognition from the vantage point of critical psychology.

Today, the notion “identity” has gained an indispensable status in the cultural, social, political, and economic spheres. In particular, when understood as group-based differences, identity, in the form of “identity politics,” has connected group differences to institutionalized power dynamics of dominance-subordination, or privilege-dispossession. In this sense, identity-based disparities have underlined if not fueled many social movements of our time. Examples such as the Standing Rock Resistance, Black Lives Matter, Me Too, LGBTQ Rights, and Free Palestine, come to mind. In each of these social movements, collective struggles for recognition are inherently connected to the politics of identity. Recognition and identity intimately entangle with one another.

### 1.1 | What is Recognition?

Charles Taylor (1994) in his influential essay, “Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition,” traced the history where the demand of recognition has been closely tied to the development of the modern notion of identity. Under the umbrella of multiculturalism, common conceptions of identity have largely focused on individual/group differences. The appeal of recognition foregrounds a moral imperative to recognize equal statuses of different identities in the society. In this way, the notion of identity and recognition are often used in tandem: the need to recognize different identities. Riding the multicultural movement, significant liberatory gains have materialized discursively and legislatively, thanks to the collective struggles for recognizing marginalized identities. Undoubtedly, identity-based recognitive initiatives have facilitated significant progress toward social justice, despite the fact that the work is far

from being done. This is quite clear in the current political and social climate, as we experience massive regression and new transgressions to already fragile social democracy in the United States and across the globe.

Meanwhile, as political theorist Nancy Fraser (1998, 2000, 2017) rightfully critiqued, when struggles for recognition are largely reduced to *identity politics*, recognitive justice can become increasingly uncoupled from distributive justice. Fraser also names the problematic tendency to conceptualize recognition for who one is, and equitable (re)-distribution of resources and rights, as mutually exclusive spheres of social justice. The conceptual uncoupling between recognition of identity and redistribution of resources can be damning to a genuine emancipatory project and social democracy (Benhabib, 2002). Fraser argues that a sufficient theory of social justice has to integrate these two distinct yet interdependent aspects. For example, Fraser demonstrates how issues of status and class in fact cut across every social movement (Fraser & Honneth, 2003), although we tend to pit one against the other. This tendency arose thematically in the aftermath of the US 2016 presidential election. Many attribute the outcome to a successful appeal to racist, white supremacist, sexist, heteronormative, and xenophobic undercurrent in the U.S.. Others underscore economic anxiety, globalization, and existential uncertainty among mostly white working class in declining rural towns. Both of these positions have been theorized by sociologists and social/political psychologists (Gorski, 2019, Pettigrew, 2017, Polletta & Callahan, 2019) who point out that such tactics are part of a long history of domestic and global strategies to gain power and influence. Nonetheless, the responses to each largely feature a dichotomous conception between recognitive struggles primarily embraced by multiculturalism, and class struggle advocated by progressives who mourn the decline of the labor movement.

## 1.2 | Multiculturalism, Identity, and Social Justice

The tension between recognitive and redistributive justice reverberates at the fissure between multiculturalism and social justice, where the multicultural movement weighs more heavily on the struggles for recognition when informed by identity politics. As a result, there has been an increasing call to integrate multiculturalism with social justice concerns (Speight & Vera, 2004), suggesting that multiculturalism often falls short in joining forces with more intersectional social justice struggles. Nancy Fraser (2017) also uses the term “progressive-neoliberal versions” of multiculturalism to articulate how the efforts of multiculturalism can be eclipsed when confounded with hidden neoliberal logic to marketize and to mask social and institutional problems as individual matters. All of those maneuvers can be covered under a trendy facade of “social justice.” This analysis reveals the fragile synergy between multiculturalism and social justice agendas.

Multiculturalism is also vulnerable to the prey of total relativism when identity categories are treated as equal in the demand for recognition but without a normative foundation to discern their differences. This tendency can foreclose the opportunity to engage in critical and intersectional analyses of power, and as a result dilute multiculturalism’s potency to engender social justice. Seyla Benhabib has pointed out that cultural essentialism can be a source of such flaws, arguing that culture-based conceptions that draw too firm boundaries around cultural identities, an assumption also embedded in Taylor’s treatment of identity, may lead to “illiberal consequences” (Benhabib, 2002, p. 68). Those consequences include the need to “police” those boundaries, which gives rise to external/fixed labels and the necessity to legitimize and authenticate (e.g. the use of “blood quota” to “certify” who is a “real” Native person; on the other hand, the use of “one drop rule” to determine who counts as an African American). This may fuel defeating comparison and competition among minority groups to discern: Which cultural group deserves more recognition? Who is oppressed more? This dynamic dissipates the potential for building solidarity.

In addition, an essentialized approach to culture neglects the culture’s own “reinvention, re-appropriation, and even subversion” (p. 68), since this would be overshadowed by a dominant narrative to promote culture continu-

ation and preservation. This tendency effectively closes up the channel to critique and challenge the culture elites as well as the culture's oppressive and exclusionary practices from within. In short, multiculturalism can fall into the fatal trap of the self-contradictory logic of relativism and cultural essentialism, where conceptions of differences become reified and fail to embrace dynamic complexity, dialectical relations, universal principles, and at times the space for holding contradictions.

It is clear that politics of difference alone cannot serve the struggle for recognition well. Here we resonate with Benhabib's quandary, "Can there be a politics of recognition that accepts the fluidity, porousness, and essential contestability of all cultures?" (Benhabib, 2002, p. 68). What does genuine recognition look like? How can we understand identity and recognition in light of authentic emancipatory pursuit without essentialization and reification? These are key questions that we will continue to wrestle with in this paper. In the following, we will further unpack the challenges of understanding identity and recognition, clarify our assumptions, and employ a point of departure. We will then engage in a theoretical reconstruction to foreground what we call *intersubjective recognition*, drawing heavily from critical theories of Nancy Fraser, Axel Honneth, and Jürgen Habermas. Following this will be an empirical example drawn from a larger ethnographic study of a multicultural counseling classroom, where we analyze moments of (mis-)recognition encountering. Grounded in empirical analysis, we aim to further deepen the understanding of intersubjective recognition.

## 2 | THEORETICAL CONTOURS

### 2.1 | Problems with "Picture Thinking"

Seyla Benhabib (2002) insightfully diagnoses that "recognition" has become "the master concept for reflection upon what appeared at first sight to be a disparate array of sociocultural movements and struggles." She went on to claim that, its "initial usefulness in illuminating a confusing landscape is soon accompanied by obscurities caused by imprecise differentiations. The more these terms cover, the less they seem to clarify" (p. 50). Indeed, some readers may resonate that we find it increasingly challenging to talk about concepts such as "self," "identity," and "recognition," due to their undifferentiated and ubiquitous uses in and outside of the academy. Those concepts can carry a variety of assumptions which are not necessarily shared by two sides of an exchange. As a result, surface semantic sameness of the word "identity" may give a currency to facilitate communication but paradoxically it also supplies misunderstanding or quick dismissals between two interlocutors who do not share similar epistemological and ontological assumptions about those concepts. Unfortunately, we do not always have the opportunity to engage in further conversation to unpack and clarify respective assumptions.

Furthermore, those concepts suffer from a systemic mischaracterization, stemming from what Phil Carspecken (2018) calls "picture thinking," prominent in both mainstream social sciences and even some counter-mainstream alternatives. Carspecken describes "picture thinking" as the tendency to think of concepts as "determined, finite form" or "finite entities framed spatially." This includes "everything that in some sense is, can be represented as a component within a picture" (p. 6). Carspecken further elaborates,

We have problems when an effort to understand the process of picturing by representing *that process itself* within the picture it creates. Uncritical picture-thinking cannot be used to *reflect* upon itself without inclusion paradoxes. When ideas spanning *fundamental* concepts like knowing, experience, being, and reality are thought together in a picture we will have a contradiction. When thinking in pictures, pre-pictures, or images we need to do so with *critical* awareness. A picture may arise in the

mind when hearing the linguistic expression of a concept like “being,” but as it does we need to simultaneously understand that the representation is inherently false if reified. What it represents must be a way of or a direction of thinking *next*. [all emphases in original] (p. 7)

Carspecken emphasizes that picture-thinking is inevitable for us to communicate after all. Every time when language is applied, we implicitly make tacit differentiation that creates a frame that simultaneously includes and excludes. However, in mainstream psychology or social sciences at large, uncritical use of “picture thinking” often (unintentionally) joins forces with individualistic, psychologizing, and neoliberal tendency in the conceptualization of “self” and “identity.” These tendencies all thrive on dichotomous conceptions by reducing structural issues to individual ones, which in turn, seriously interferes with critical and complex thinking and reflection. Echoing our earlier discussion, when identity is primarily understood as distinctive and “flat” categories or group memberships, it can quickly become essentialized or reified. This flattening shows up as implicit reductionist assumptions in identity politics. Many concepts become locked up in fixed dichotomous schemes such as good/bad, liberal/conservative, oppressed/oppressor, marginalized/dominant, and so on (see Fine (1994) for an excellent analysis). As a result, complexity is reduced to simplified dimensions; dialectical movements between sameness and difference are reified to stiff frames without fluidity.

On the other hand, picture-thinking can also show up in unreflective or limited deconstructive approaches that are common in the postmodernist/poststructuralist turn. Basically, ineffective deconstruction only succeeds in emptying the contents from a picture but the frame of the picture remains (Carspecken, 2018). For instance, deconstructing the frame of “self” as a stable and essential entity, a prominent assumption in mainstream psychology, is critical and absolutely necessary. However, if a deconstruction only negates the existence of the self (e.g. “self is dead”, or “self is an illusion”) without also deconstructing the very notion of “existence”, and reflexively connecting such claim back to the very speaker who makes such claim, it can lead to self-contradictory logic (e.g. who is speaking then?). Thus, even in the name of counter-mainstream or critical approaches, picture-thinking can still persist in more subtle forms, often accompanied by incommutability (e.g. when language itself is dismantled – even this approach carries crucial insight about the limits of language), or void of affective and existential engagement. This may foreclose the possibilities of agency, commitment, responsibility and action. Consequently, it ends up reproducing a privileged epistemological position which the approach itself sets out to critique and transform. Overall, committing “picture thinking” in both mainstream and counter-mainstream academic discourses hampers deeper critical analysis of power and the preservation of nuances and paradoxes pertinent to preserving liberatory potentials. We echo Benhabib’s (2002) charge that, “the politics of complex cultural dialogue...would hold that the categories of self and other identification in public life should be as complex and as richly textured as social reality itself” (p. 75).

## 2.2 | Theorizing Intersubjective Recognition

Now that we name the pitfalls of imprecise differentiations and picture-thinking, we would like to explore the theoretical foundation for an intersubjective approach to understand identity and the nature of recognition. To rejoin our earlier discussions, we first briefly introduce the debate between Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth regarding their distinct proposals to develop a unifying framework that connects recognition and redistribution. We will further articulate how we apply Honneth’s theory of recognition as our basis, in juncture with the works of Fraser, Benhabib, and Jürgen Habermas to forge our understanding of intersubjective recognition.

## 2.2.1 | Recognition or Distribution: Fraser and Honneth Debate/Dialogue

In their joined 2003 text, *Redistribution or Recognition?: A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, Fraser and Honneth embark on a dialogue to examine their diverging perspectives on how to devise a unifying theory to account for both recognitive and redistributive justice. It is not our intention here to give an adequate account of their rich and complex theories and dialogue; our goal is to highlight a couple of non-dualistic, non-reductionist, and promising analytical frameworks that attempt to theorize recognition and redistribution in relation to a theory of justice. In a nutshell, Fraser and Honneth convey a shared stance that they “reject the economic view that would reduce recognition to a mere epiphenomenon of distribution” (Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p. 2) - a view that we also share. But they also acknowledge their agreement ends there. embark on a dialogue to examine their diverging perspectives on how to devise a unifying theory to account for both recognitive and redistributive justice. It is not our intention here to give an adequate account of their rich and complex theories and dialogue; our goal is to highlight a couple of non-dualistic, non-reductionist, and promising analytical frameworks that attempt to theorize recognition and redistribution in relation to a theory of justice. In a nutshell, Fraser and Honneth convey a shared stance that they “reject the economic view that would reduce recognition to a mere epiphenomenon of distribution” (Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p. 2) - a view that we also share. But they also acknowledge their agreement ends there.

### Nancy Fraser's two dimensional theory of justice

Fraser is wary of current eclipsing effects of redistribution over recognition and advocates for a “perspectival dualist” approach (p. 4). She insists that the two domains ought to be treated as “co-fundamental and mutually irreducible dimensions of justice,” and “neither of these injustices is an indirect effect of the other” (p. 19). Meanwhile, failure of recognition, or *misrecognition*, and failure to egalitarian distribution, or *maldistribution*, are conceptualized as two interconnected manifestations of social injustice. Fraser integrates *status hierarchy*, prominent in misrecognition, and class structure, salient in maldistribution as two “socially entrenched order of *subordination*” (p. 48). She acknowledges that status order and class order are analytically and substantially distinct. This unity and independence dialectic underlines Fraser's two-dimensional theory. Drawing from her conception of capitalism, Fraser illustrates how the emergence of modernized *status subordination* coincides with the rise of the politics of recognition (see Fraser & Honneth (2003) for a detailed analysis). Through connecting recognition to unequal status of social actors to participate in social life, which is at bottom perpetuated by institutionalized patterns of subordination, Fraser reconstructs the common association between recognition and the fulfillment of one's self-actualization. In this way, Fraser reframes recognition within a framework of justice on the grounds of everyone's right for equal social participation. Forms of subordination and patterns of *exclusions* impedes impartial participation, and thus deems injustice. Fraser's approach also allows her to bridge recognitive and redistributive injustice, both through the lack of *participatory parity*, where subordinated status prevents people from participating in reciprocal recognition, or equal access to resources. On this note, Fraser writes,

... a society has a status hierarchy is to say that its institutionalized patterns of cultural value pervasively deny some members the recognition they need in order to be full, participating partners in social interaction. The existence of either a class structure or a status hierarchy constitutes an obstacle to parity of participation and thus an injustice (p. 49).

We find Fraser's theory compelling as it moves beyond politics of differences and unravels hierarchical status orders beneath such differences and connects such hierarchy to forms of social and economic exclusion. In this

way, Fraser's theory has a strong normative basis from the bottom up, bearing potential for uniting recognitive and redistributive struggles, both as struggles for justice. Fraser calls this theory, "two-dimensional conception of justice" (p. 34). It foregrounds democratic participation and deliberation as a shared principle for solidarity building across struggles in the jointed battle against injustice. Fraser states,

With perspective dualism, then, one can assess the justice of any social practice, regardless of where it is institutionally located, from two analytically distinct normative vantage points, asking: does the practice in question work to ensure both the objective and intersubjective conditions of participatory parity? Or does it, rather, undermine them (p. 63)?

This analytical "dualism" and Fraser's guiding questions on participatory parity provides a very helpful normative principle in guiding social practices, which holds the Gestalt between recognitive and redistributive justice. In addition, Fraser's theory in its critical spirit serves an effective antidote to picture thinking and essentialism. In her own words, Fraser reminds us,

A genuinely critical perspective, in contrast, cannot take the appearance of separate sphere at face value. Rather, it must probe beneath appearances to reveal the hidden connections between distribution and recognition. It must make visible, and criticizable, both the cultural subtexts of nominally economic processes and economic subtexts of nominally cultural practices. Tracing every practice as simultaneously economic and cultural, albeit not necessarily in equal proportions, it must assess each of them from two different perspectives (p. 62).

### Honneth's normative theory of recognition

Axel Honneth's (1996, 2014) theory of recognition bears the spirit of Hegel's original formulation of "the struggle for recognition." It is commonly credited to his Lordship and Bondage dialectic in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel, 1977). However, Honneth also draws insights from Hegel's early work (i.e. Jena period) prior to the publication of *Phenomenology* and conceives a broader understanding of recognition that includes but goes beyond violent life/death and power struggle featured in the Lordship and Bondage relationship. Honneth's conception of recognitive relationships encompasses affectionate bonds, legal rights, and social standing and belonging, all of which has an intersubjective foundation. Each concerns a "reciprocal relation between subjects in which each sees each other as its equal and also separate from it" (Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p. 10). Recognition is understood as *mutual recognition* in the sense that the one who is recognizing is also being recognized by the addressee of the recognition (Honneth, 1996). This intersubjectively based social theory finds its long tradition in the lineage of Frankfurt critical theory that Honneth is part of, bearing the footsteps of Kant, Hegel, Marx, Adorno, Horkheimer, Habermas and so on. A key assumption of critical theory is that individuation, or the development of the self, emerges out of social interactions, and thus "intersubjectivity is prior to subjectivity" (Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p. 10) and human identity is communicatively constituted, that is, individuation through socialization (Habermas, 1992).

Similar to Habermas (1981, 1984), Honneth borrows crucial insights from George Herbert Mead's (1934) intersubjective theory of identity development. Mead's theory offers an intersubjective account of the ontogenesis of human self and identity, rooted in language and communication. Following pragmatist intuition, Mead insists that self-consciousness is the "product" of the self-positing in a performative attitude toward another subject rather than the other way around. In short, Mead develops a dialogic formulation of human identity as constructed and maintained through a dialogical relation between "I" and "me": the "I" as the narrator and actor, and the various "me"

claims, resulting from the acts of self-depositing. Since this occurs through social interaction, possible “me” claims is inherently connected first to the recognitive interaction with significant care-givers during one’s early life, and later, to the recognition of “the generalized other”, which Mead defines as an abstraction of available third-person positions in relation to the actor in a given historical and cultural context. Through a normative “I-me-we” complex, one sets to develop a unique autobiography (self-realization) and a sense of moral-agency (self-determination), both integral to identity development (Habermas, 1992). In this sense, identity, intersubjective recognition, and moral development are internally connected.

This connection shows up as a major thread in Honneth’s theory of recognition. Struggle for recognition is deemed a moral issue because “the feelings of outrage and indignation driving them are generated by the rejection of claims to recognition and thus imply normative judgements about the legitimacy of social arrangements” (Honneth, 1996, p. xii). Honneth’s theory maps out three levels of identity development, or what he refers to as three “practical relation-to-self,” namely, *self-confidence*, *self-respect*, and *emphself-esteem*. They correspond to three reciprocal recognitive relations: primary relationships (e.g. love, friendship), legal relationship (i.e. rights), and community of value (i.e. solidarity) (p. 129). This formulation implies an interlocking developmental *telo* for identity and moral development: “[T]he subjective autonomy of the individual increases with each stage of mutual regard” (p. 94). Meanwhile, this typology of recognition can be mapped onto distinctive forms of *disrespect* in terms of “which level of a person’s intersubjectively acquired relation-to-self they injure or even destroy” (p. 94).

Drawing from object-relation theory, especially the work of Donald Winnicott, Honneth uses the term “self-confidence” to describe a particular form of practical self-relation established through the development of strong emotional attachment such as love, care, and friendship with concrete others. Basically, love relationship is deemed “a form of *mutual recognition*” (p. 98). In this context, recognition manifests as “affective approval or encouragement” (p. 94), an expression for esteem, which “produces the degree of basic individual self-confidence indispensable for autonomous participation in public life” (p. 107). This form of recognition enables the establishment of *autonomy* and physical *integrity* of the developing person. Honneth agrees with object-relation theorists’ assertion that a safe attachment through prelinguistic interaction is particularly crucial for the establishment of self-confidence.

In contrast, “self-respect” signals a practical self-relation as a person of dignity, who possesses legal rights. Honneth points out that to exercise one’s legal rights requires a capacity to act as a morally responsible agent to appeal to universal ideal of legal rights of all people. This reveals an intersubjective core: “we can only come to understand ourselves as the bearers of rights when we know, in turn, what various normative obligations we must keep vis-a-vis others” and “recognize the other members of the community as the bearers of rights” (p. 108). Thus, legal relations are understood as another form of mutual recognition, which carries a moral grammar. Lastly, “self-esteem” refers to “a form of social esteem that allows [human subjects] to relate positively to their concrete traits and abilities” (p. 121). This third layer of practical self-relation requires mutual recognition of “an intersubjectively shared value horizon” that “indicate to each other the significance or contribution of their qualities for the life of the other” (p. 121). This form of recognition supplies a sense of social belonging and solidarity, and an appreciation of cultural differences.

Based on this three-part typology of recognition and their respective significance to identity formation, Honneth derives three forms of misrecognition accordingly, conceived as violations of one’s need for closeness, love, and safety (e.g. abuse, physical and psychological violence and negligence), of one’s legal rights (e.g. exclusion, and denial of human rights and legal rights), and of one’s dignity, uniqueness, and differences (e.g. insult, disrespect, or devaluation) (Honneth, 1996). In contrast to Fraser’s “perspectival dualism”, Honneth attempts to integrate recognition and redistribution under a “normative monism” of recognition, which subsumes claims for redistribution under the banner of recognition (Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p. 3). It is unclear if this attempt has been fully successful (see a detailed analysis in (Zurn, 2005)). While both theorists build their unifying framework on intersubjective, normative



and moral grounds, they part ways regarding their solutions to remediate the problematic schism between recognition and redistribution. Nonetheless, both of them offer insightful, generative, and analytically powerful alternatives for the study of recognition and social justice. In the following, we will further clarify our own theoretical stance and assumptions of intersubjective recognition. We take on a reconstructive approach to draw out helpful perspectives from both Fraser and Honneth to develop a theoretical reconstruction that we find is sensitive to some psychological and micro-level interests, while holding the complexity of structural and institutionalized influence and dynamics.

### 2.3 | Identity and Recognition: Affirming an Intersubjective Stance

We resonate with Fraser and Honneth's efforts that resist dichotomizing social justice, which could lead to flattening and essentializing complex concepts such as recognition. Similarly, we share Fraser's and Benhabib's stance that it is crucial not to reduce either identity and recognition to identity politics, which already struggles with essentializing and reifying effects. We also condone Fraser's view that the examination of recognition cannot stand apart from its interlocking relations to redistribution, despite necessary demarcation between the two. Taking from Fraser, when studying recognition, an intersectional analysis of related redistributive justice is necessary even the latter may only loom in the backstage in a given empirical context. Her effort to reconceptualize recognition on the plane of subordination status and exclusion of participation elegantly ties communicative actions associated with recognition to institutionalized patterns of power and disparity, and more directly to a normative foundation based on a theory of justice. Meanwhile, we find Honneth's intersubjective theory of recognition quite useful for our specific interest in understanding (mis)-recognition that takes place in communicative contexts where various forms of practical self-other and self-self relations become foregrounded.

As practicing psychologists, we recognize the imprints of misrecognition in all three forms articulated by Honneth, which may manifest as developmental, social and cultural trauma, as psychological symptoms and "pathologies" (that we refuse to reduce to individual problems), as concrete and structural violence that infiltrates one's integrity, denies rights and resources, disparages differences, erodes dignity and self-respect, and fuels internalized self-hatred. Similarly, as educators we observe frequent incidences of misrecognition in the classroom, at school meetings, among colleagues, and ironically in progressive spaces that are saturated with social justice slogans. Those professional experiences have also become impetus for us to better understand intersubjective (mis)recognition and related precipitating conditions in concrete social and educational spaces. Such insight may provide clues for transforming oppressive conditions and practices that fuel misrecognition and maldistribution, especially in the everyday context that are often taken for granted.

Overall, our affinity to Honneth's intersubjective account of identity and recognition lies in the fact that it very well houses our core assumptions of intersubjective and normative primacy of social reality. It ties the struggles for self-realization/self-actualization to interpersonal, social, and political struggles for recognition and social solidarity. In particular, Honneth's typology of recognition connects those distinct and yet interconnected domains of human experiences, encompassing self-self and self-other relations, affective and existential needs, institutionalized rights, social and cultural identities, and inter-group dynamics. Many of those domains can be mapped onto the disciplinary interests of psychology. In fact, Honneth's application of object-relation theory illustrates the potential for the contribution of psychological insights to critical understanding of power and oppression that connect individual and society. In addition, we are drawn to an interdisciplinary theoretical framework like Honneth's, which can facilitate a generative dialogue between psychological, sociological, and political perspectives. This kind of framework is better equipped to resist psychology's pervasive individualism and its largely apolitical nature, while to illuminate the unconscious, subjective and interpersonal realms, aspects that should also not be eclipsed by macro and structural analyses.

On the other hand, we understand that intersubjective (mis)-recognition, as any social action, is deeply connected to sociological, structural, and institutionalized conditioning and reproduction of those very conditions (Giddens, 1984). Thus, it is paramount to adopt Fraser's critical dualism to hold multiple horizons all at once, including critical and *intersectional* power analysis across those horizons to penetrate the phenomenological and the structural divide. In the following, we will introduce moments of social interaction, from a larger ethnographic study of a graduate multicultural counseling class. Through analyzing this critical incident, we unpack a social encounter of mis/recognition situated in rich empirical context to further elucidate a more nuanced and practical understanding of recognition as a social phenomenon.

## 3 | MIS/RECOGNITION IN INTERACTION: AN EMPIRICAL ILLUSTRATION

### 3.1 | A Critical Incident of Mis/recognition

The larger study was situated in two graduate level multicultural education courses in a private college in the Northeast. Our analysis foregrounds a hermeneutic understanding of mis/recognition in the discursive space of classroom interactions. We juxtapose interactional and narrative analyses with *reconstructive* analyses that attempt to make explicit backgrounded social norms and structures that either enable or limit communicative interactions (Carspecken, 1996).

The critical incident featured below took place one third into the semester, at which point the class focused on the topics of race and oppression. Students were largely silent and tense especially among the white students until this point, and then tension turned outward in a heated moment. Figure 1 sketches out the interactions among a few students in that moment. Here we start with a white woman, Amy (pseudonym), asking "why we always have to talk about differences?", to which Kesha, a black woman, shares a personal story of what it means for her to live as a black woman. "It's until you live that every day, you're just not gonna get it," she summed up. Jake, a white man, somewhat disagrees with her comments and states, "We're talking about very surface level things... we all deal with things." Another white woman, Mary, offers that we can talk about finding commonalities, but it always comes down to "yeah, you go through your stuff." Jake explains his interpretation of the facial expression of Frank, a black man in the moment, asserting, "You can retaliate any time." Frank offers input, suggesting that it is telling how Jake uses language such as "retaliate" which is indicative of his understanding of conversation overall, and possibly speaks to his feelings of safety. The instructor chimes in, noting that what Kesha said was not surface and in fact, meaningful and profound. There is a lot to unpack here regarding mis/recognition, but given the limited space we have, we choose to closely examine one particular exchange during this interaction sequence and follow one particular actor, Jake, to explore his engagement with disrecognition and misrecognition.

#### 3.1.1 | A Moment of Disrecognition

Analyzing this sequence of interaction compels us to make a further differentiation of various shades of misrecognition. We recognize a particular form of misrecognition, which we call *disrecognition*. It comes from a place of ignorance, with the bypassing of critical information, and involves one taking a place of superiority within relational dialogue or a communicative action in general. Instances of disrecognition may not be a conscious process, though other times it can be a deliberate emphasis, in line with a view of "color blindness." In this way, a critical awakening has not occurred. Disrecognition, from an intersubjective perspective, is to *negate* someone else's experience, and to see them through the dominant paradigm. Below highlights such a moment:

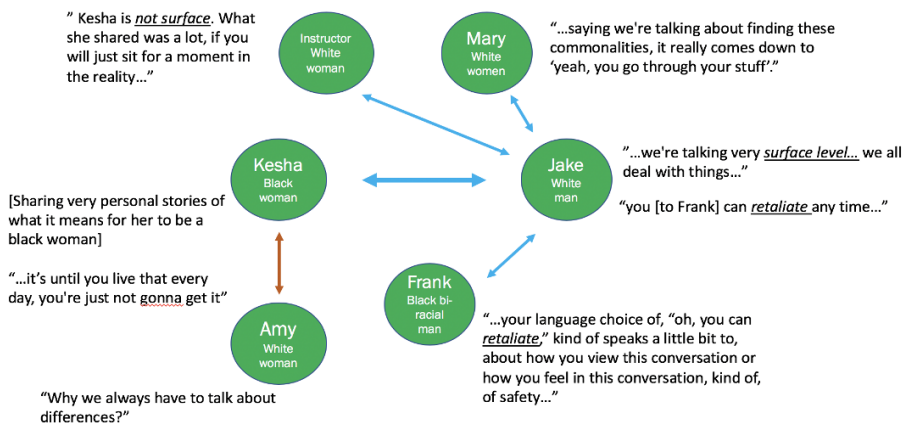
**Kesha** Why can't we just be, you know, human beings and navigate the world together, but it's just not that way. And it's, until you live that every day, you're just not gonna get it. And it's, I think that's just the reality of it, and that's why it's important when people of color share their stories, just listen, and like you said, empathy sometimes is all you can give, because sometimes you don't have the answers, and you're not gonna have the answers. Because you don't know what the answers are. You don't live the life. But just validating that it is real for them, for me, for us, like, I think that that's the most important thing you can do.

**Jake** I think, I'd like to start, it's a great perspective, and I think you've touched on a couple key points... [inaudible] It's almost contradictory... [inaudible] you said that... [inaudible] But right in the middle, you said you can't speak for all of us.

**Kesha** Yeah. I can't.

**Jake** So I that's where, like, we're sitting here and we're talking very surface level, because it's, everybody's experience is different, whether you're Black, white, whatever, and I think that's where Z [referring to another white male student who spoke earlier] was starting, was, like, we need to find commonalities, but it's not even about the commonalities. It's like yes, you deal with this, yes, we all deal with things, but at the same point in time, like, you're missing out on a whole lot of individual, and you're right, everybody's leaving their best part at home, because everybody puts on this mask, and then, you know, I think that's the best thing you said, was the part I appreciate most is you dress up. And you want to know, I think a big part of that is everybody in this world dresses up in some capacity, and I'm not trying to neutralize, like, race or culture or anything here. I'm trying to see deeper in the fact that we're talking about individuals, and like, I'm not, enough, but I see you [to Frank, a black male student sitting across him in circle] shaking heads over here, and it's fine. You can retaliate any time, I'm okay with that, 'cause I'm not trying to take away from what's happening.

**FIGURE 1** A Critical Incident: A Sketch of the Interaction



This interaction between Kesha and Jake carries a moment of *disrecognition* with Jake taking a place of superiority in communication, effectively negating Kesha's experience through his own dominant perspective. Jake speaks at his peers, ignores what is shared, and projects identity formulation to Kesha with claims that her perspective is inaccurate. Jake appeared not aware of his privileged positions that would allow him to say "we are all human". His

color-blind horizon helps to sustain a form of deep-seated *epistemology of ignorance* (Mills, 2007, 2015) that functions to foreclose his own consciousness of truly understanding power and oppressive dynamics. Thus, themes of irony and false certainty play out. Kesha shares a piece of herself that is held deeply in her identity, and Jake interrupts this offering by informing her that he would like to *see deeper* into who she is as an *individual*, not grasping her comments about how “race” and “color” shape who she is in any meaningful way. He fails to *recognize* the structural implications at the nexus of racism and sexism, and therefore has no capacity to understand how oppressive forces shape Kesha’s identity. Disrecognition, therefore, serves Jake to preserve his understanding of identity through a white, male, working class perspective, perpetuated by individualism and a privileged humanistic ideology.

### 3.1.2 | From Disrecognition to Misrecognition

Whereas disrecognition functions to negate and discredit another person, whether consciously or unconsciously, we understand intersubjective misrecognition as the flattening and diminishing complexity and dynamics of identity. Jake was interviewed a few weeks after the critical incident, and reflected on his involvement, with an angry undertone, that he was misunderstood or misrepresented.

**Jake** *I made a terrible articulation and it’s like, I just got hammered in class for, like, thirty minutes. And then after that, it was like, I left class and, like, I was hot in the head. I was like, “you kidding me?” Like, here I am coming off like racist asshole. And it’s like... like the things I go and do, and go out of my way to do to make sure I’m treating everybody as a person, and here I am and I’m the bad guy.*

Jake still appeared to mis-recognize, or perhaps stubbornly deny, what had transpired. He did not seem to understand how deducing another from a flawed conception of identity can turn into a form of objectification, and thus disrecognition. This shade of misrecognition of the other is essentially a form of *self misrecognition* as well. It might play out as a result of a distorted self-consciousness that is deprived of access to deeper self reflection and the humility to accept one’s own vulnerability and fallibility. We suspect this may coincide with the structural effects of patriarchal and masculine socialization that keep men from acquiring communicative and emotional capability to de-center oneself, to fluid position-taking, and to open oneself to vulnerable emotions.

Later on, during Jake’s one-year follow-up interview, he reflected on his participation in the class as well as his understanding of the concepts that the class focused on. His style of conversation still embodied an *explanatory* style, yet he wavered in his confidence at times. He still made claims of false certainties, such as “I am 100% more aware.” On other occasions, he suggested that he is working through his thoughts still, and acknowledges the complexity of identity, oppression, and social justice. He initially spoke about his awareness of his male privilege, but often steered the conversation away from race/racism, and mostly spoke in abstractions rather than from experience or a concrete place of groundedness. Below is an excerpt from the interview, discussing his memory of the critical incident:

**Jake** *When we were talking about white privilege and the oppression of color, and I was sitting there and I was pissed, because I understood the white privilege, I understood individuals who were oppressed, but my point of view is the fact that I didn’t understand why we couldn’t look at people as people. Because that’s how I see everybody. And a thing that came up was one individual had said, “I’m,” I think it was, trying to remember exactly what they said, but they were sitting there and they were like, “I am Black and that’s a part of me,” and my response was, which ended up coming out terribly in class, was “that’s great. I’m glad that’s a part of you, if you want it to be a part of you. But I would rather come to you, see you as a blank slate, talk to you and view that as a part of your identifying component,*

*that's excellent. But I would rather hear that from you than assume the fact that because you're Black, you are going to identify as Black." And that was what I was trying to convey in class, but did not adequately come across.*

One year later, Jake illustrated that privilege and oppression are real to him, but in a depleted sense, vacating the deeper meanings of identity and backgrounded institutionalized patterns beyond individual will. If true recognition requires a critical, contextualized, and complex understanding of power in between the hyphen of self-other (Fine, 1994), it appears that Jake frames his understanding in an individualistic manner, seemingly unable to hold structural forces with his conceptions of identity. There is therefore no opportunity for *reciprocal* recognition, because while he acknowledges the language of social justice, he lacks a critical understanding of identity and oppression that requires an elevation from an individualistic conception to a systemic and structural one. Misrecognition then is characterized by an acknowledgement of "identity," but in a reduced and flattened sense, as a picture-like entity, and with an absence of nuance. There can still be a sense of authentic curiosity, however, dialectical awareness and contemplation is lacking. The ability to discern one being an equal but also acknowledge entrenched patterns of inequality is an important nuance that is not adequately understood.

### 3.2 | Revisiting Theory

Our analysis of those dis/mis/recognitive moments also resonates with some aspects of Honneth's and Fraser's respective theories of recognition. For Honneth's theory, what is most foregrounded in this critical incidence, among his three forms of recognition, is the aspect of "self-esteem." It manifests as social actors' mutual recognition of each other's unique traits and contribution to each other's life, based on a shared value horizon, the basis for social solidarity. What transpired in the class encounter features a misrecognition from Jake in relation to Keshia's self-esteem regarding how she would like to experience and define herself. This misrecognition further points at the lack of a shared value horizon in terms of a grounded understanding of systems of oppression, such as the impacts of racism. There was an adverse condition for solidarity formation.

Similarly, in the interaction we recognize Fraser's (mis)-conception of recognition primarily in relation to dominant and subordinate status, and exclusion of participation. Jake took on a superior position, assuming his perspective a "deeper" one in contrast to Keshia's "superficial" counterpart, and he claims his stance as a universal "we" and "everybody" stance. Whether this action orientation was conscious or not, it ended up flattening differences, obscuring power relations, and masking institutionalized patterns stemming from racism. Meanwhile, as Fraser emphasizes, any analysis of (mis)recognition should also attend to patterns of (mal)-redistribution. In this example, even redistributive (in)justice is much more backgrounded, we can draw some higher-level inferences (thus more likely to be wrong) about it. For instance, this class encounter to some extent sheds light on students of color's experiences in a predominantly white institution, and how dis/mis-recognitive experiences may reinforce alienation and exclusion, and as a result, contribute to the reproduction of white dominance in higher education, which is a form of maldistribution and a form of institutionalized injustice.

In addition, seeing others in fixed categorical terms is *in itself* a form of misrecognition, because it objectifies *the other*, and reproduces the notion of identity as finite. A finite view of identity negates the inherent transcending nature of the human self: the "negative" aspect of identity (Carspecken, 2018). All shades of misrecognition, from disrecognition to more subtle forms of misrecognition, repeatedly enacted in communicative encounters, function to sustain and reproduce structural configurations of power and oppression and their institutionalized patterns. Misrecognition also forecloses opportunities to engage in the practice of self-reflection and fluid critical power analysis, the possibility for genuine solidarity building, and the capability for forgiveness and love (Henze & Carspecken, 2018). Freire (1973) understood that solidarity is only possible when one stops regarding the oppressed in categorical notions

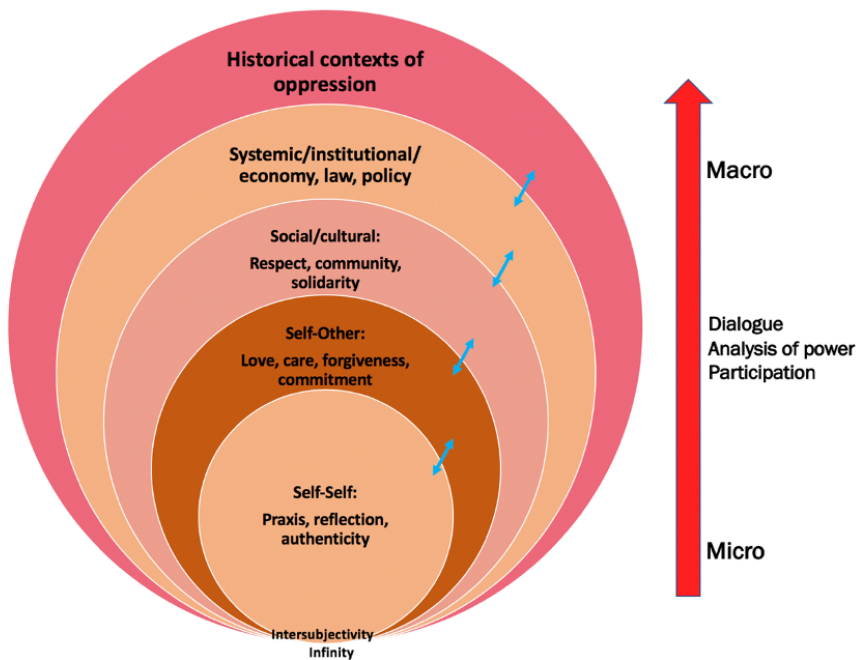
and sees them as persons who have struggled through injustice, marginalization, and dehumanization. On this note, Ibram X Kendi in *How to Be An Anti-racist* (2019), poignantly articulates similar insights in the context of addressing racism:

The White body no longer presents itself as the American body; the Black body no longer strives to be the American body, knowing there is no such thing as the American body, only American bodies, racialized by power (p. 34).

### 3.3 | The Empirical and the Theoretical

Our empirical work as a whole helps us to ground and situate our formal understanding of recognition in everyday communicative contexts. Through ongoing bi-directional dialogue between theory and phenomenon, we found Gadamer's notion of *hermeneutic horizon* (Gadamer, 1975) a quite useful analytical tool to organize dynamic aspects of (mis)-recognition. Figure 2 includes a graphic portrayal of our current conception of recognition. It undoubtedly carries the footprints of Fraser, Benhabib, Honneth, Habermas, Carspecken, and more, whose works were sketched above. This conceptual "framework" delineates recognition across several intertwined horizons: on the levels of self-self relation, self-other relation, and more backgrounded social/cultural and systemic/institutional horizons. All these horizons are connected to a further backgrounded horizon: the historical contexts of oppression and resistance. The sources of (mis)-recognition can always be traced historically. Understanding history can serve as a powerful catalyst for critical awareness of structural and systemic legacies and patterns, away from attributions on the individual level.

**FIGURE 2** A Conceptual Understanding of Recognition



All horizons are dynamically related, distinct yet interpenetrating, and can be “fused” in a given context in the sense of horizon fusion (Gadamer, 1975). The “whole” is like a shifting Gestalt, never complete, and self-transcending, thus is always open to be questioned and reinvented. We do not intend for a grand theory that fully explains recognition, since the very nature of recognition resists such totalization. Our conception is at best a “useful fiction” that may provide insights for practice and research. Meanwhile, for a specific context, various horizons form a foregrounding/backgrounding relationship, which can be more or less explicated upon reflection and via reconstructive analysis that makes the implicit explicit (Carspecken, 1996). The red arrow in Figure 2 indicates a set of processes that cut across all horizons and may serve as facilitating conditions for the practice of recognition on all levels. Those include a willingness to understand self and others through genuine dialogue, engaging in critical analysis of power, and a commitment to participation and actions. Related to the last point on participation, Michelle Fine and colleagues’ recent work on queer youth activists powerfully illustrates how participation in the form of solidarity activism can mitigate devastating effects of misrecognition (Fine et al., 2018).

To unpack this “useful fiction” further, we would like to highlight a few emerging aspects of recognition stemming from our empirical engagement that cannot be explicated here. First, we learned that the affective and emotional layer of experience can be salient in the phenomenon of (mis-)recognition. This theme surfaced repeatedly in the multicultural education classrooms that we observed. Emotional experiences such as fear, shock, guilt, shame, being wronged, resentment, anger and so on often accompany a potential existential threat of being perceived as a “bad” or “not good” person. We also witnessed tremendous honesty, courage, and authenticity when some students took the risk to confront the privileged and dominant aspects of themselves. In *Damaged Life* (1996), Tod Sloan examines how systematic distortion through ideology (following the Marxist definition of this term) may constrain symbolic processes. The effects of ideology, such as capitalism, racism and patriarchy, on communicative processes illustrates the power relation between “subject and system” (p.97). Sloan claims that, ideology places “constraints [emphasis in original] on self-understanding and intersubjectivity and the role that these constraints play in the stabilization of the social order and the maintenance of oppression and domination. These constraints usually involve a complex interaction of cognitive, affective and interpersonal action patterns” (p. 97).

Following Sloan, we argue that to foster intersubjective recognition, there is a need to “de-territorize” constrained affective and emotional experiences, which “prevent the institutionalization of capacities for communication and empathy” (p. 121). This process of deterritorialization would require critical awareness and the capacity for self-decentering and position-taking, which can be best developed through social actions and participation. This is also how we understand *authenticity*: people learn to open up themselves for empathy, love, and humility, moving toward praxis, commitment, and engagement *critically*. These dynamics remind us that the three aspects of recognition outlined by Honneth: love, rights, and solidarity are indeed interdependent with one another.

Our overall empirical analysis also foregrounds another feature of recognition that is not often discussed. It pertains to the infinite and transcending nature of human identity, and related ontological contradictions inherent in cognitive endeavors. Phil Carspecken’s work delves into this area (Carspecken, 2009, 2018; Henze & Carspecken, 2018). Carspecken emphasizes “the infinity of human ontology” (Carspecken, 2018, p. 207) in the aspect that our sense of self always transcends any claim we make about ourselves. Thus, we cannot be fully known by others or even by ourselves. Meanwhile, we have a fundamental desire for recognition. Carspecken writes, the “human existential desire for recognition is a desire for self-certainty, self-affirmation and the states of being that accord with such knowledge” (p. 207). The chronic ontological contradiction of pursuing something that cannot be fulfilled through the act of the pursuit complicates what Carspecken calls, the “violent” effects of representation. That is, “violence of representation” not only shows up as forms of misrecognition based on power and dominance, it also manifests when “the transcending, infinite nature of human ontology is obscured or denied” (p. 207), which leads to objectification.

This suggests that true recognition has to presuppose a fundamental understanding and respect for this transcending and infinite nature of every human being. This is without flattening or obscuring power relations that re/produce hierarchies, subordinate status, and biased policies, and the immense consequences of oppression across the globe. This is fundamentally different from the color-blind assumption that “we are all human beings.” Drawing insights from Hegel’s dialectic of moral consciousness, Carspecken argues that, “Recognizing the Other as subject is the way in which the ‘I’ that wants to fill the ‘world’ changes to a relational ‘I’ that can love and that can live with others in a community in which there are many relationships characterized by mutual recognition” (p. 214). This would require forgiveness that can only emerge from dialectical tension in the struggles for justice. Carspecken further describes the nature of this forgiveness as:

From an inherent taint, a condition of hypocrisy, of dishonesty in expressive actions that wish to address the Other with respect, true recognition, true affirmation while allowing the unknowability, the autonomy of the Other to remain, there is a movement toward *forgiveness* [emphasis in original] which reconciles a situation that otherwise unintentionally leads to harm (p. 213).

We consider Carspecken’s take on forgiveness a *critical* stance of this concept. An uncritical read of “forgiveness” can easily slide into empty empathy that often gives the dominant group members a pat on the shoulder, or trap us in superficial humanism that flattens differences, power, and oppression.

In addition to the affective and ontological features of (mis)recognition, we also would like to underscore the role of *dialogue* in facilitating recognition. What we mean by “dialogue” is a broader reference to communicative and discursive practices that harbor the principle of an “ideal speech situation” articulated by Habermas (1981, 2008). An ideal speech situation entails: publicity and inclusiveness; equal rights to engage in communication; exclusion of deception and illusion; and the absence of coercion (Habermas, 2008, p. 50). It is important to note that those principles should not be taken up as empirical imperatives, but a normative compass to guide the practice. In a larger sense, the notion of dialogue moves beyond immediate communicative situations and it necessitates a commitment to and a responsibility for civil *participation*, whether it is in the classroom, everyday life, one’s community, or the social/political movements of our time. In this fashion, the notion of dialogue and social actions/participation do not oppose each other but can be integrated. This echoes Benhabib’s (2002) deliberative democratic approach to recognition and justice. She expresses an unapologetic affirmation of a communicative and dialogue-based approach to combat injustice:

The deliberative democratic model views individuals as beings capable of cultural narration and resignification, who through their actions reappropriate and transform their cultural legacies. As opposed to the one-sided effort of much contemporary liberal theory to find a juridical answer to multicultural dilemmas, I emphasize processes of cultural communication, contestation, and resignification occurring within civil society. Legal measures and guidelines surely have a crucial role in framing the limits within which our actions ought to unfold; however, cross-cultural understanding is furthered primarily by processes of understanding and communication within civil society. (p. 81)



## 4 | CONCLUSION

In this paper we aim to understand and theorize intersubjective recognition. Situating our discussion in interdisciplinary perspectives, we briefly trace the history of struggles for recognition, decoupling cognitive justice from identity politics, and exploring possibilities of integrating cognitive and redistributive justice through two major theories of recognition. Drawing from theoretical and empirical insights, we work toward a reconstructive understanding of intersubjective recognition.

We see our effort only as the beginning of a long-haul quest. Nonetheless, we hope to enter a critical dialogue that complicates the discussion of identity and recognition in psychology. We contend that for a field that was founded on the study of the self, there is tremendous potential to deepen and expand our critical understanding of the topic of identity and recognition, which transcends mainstream individualistic and psychologizing perspectives. To do so we need to hold those concepts in their full complexity, interwoven to the grand schemes of oppression, dispossession, in/justice, democratic participation, and social solidarity. Yet many questions remain to be wrestled with. To just name a few: How can we work against fixed binary conceptions of recognition and distribution to revive critical study of identity and recognition? How can we reconcile multiculturalism and social justice through a critical understanding of identity and recognition? And what does it mean for psychologists to connect cognitive and redistributive justice in research and practice?

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