

POSITIVE RECOGNITION

Kirsi Pauliina Kallio and Jonni Häkli, Tampere University

Abstract

'Positive Recognition' is a theoretically informed practice-oriented approach, developed in co-creative research with professionals working with children and youth in various roles in different institutional contexts (the PR approach). An important facet of the continuing building of the approach is participatory work with children, young people, and other persons potentially lacking recognition in the society due to their social status or a challenging life situation. The PR approach offers operational principles that set out to strengthen dignity and inclusion in political communities and to encourage people's active agency in matters they find important. While developed primarily in research with young persons, it can be implemented in any social context where encounters between different people are pivotal and contested – for example, with migrants whose presence in the host society is met with disdain, or with minorities whose role in building socially sustainable urban communities is neglected. Drawing from critical democracy theories, the PR approach emphasizes that, while societal structures and power relations cannot be erased, they can be contested and changed. The approach is premised on the idea that children and young people, as well as other politically marginalized groups, have capacities to act as political subjects in their mundane communities regardless of their citizenship status, and that they can be supported to engage with politicized matters at broader scales. In terms of intergenerationality, the PR approach suggests that, through dignified encounters, 'aged' differences between people in different generational positions can be contested, along with gendered, classed, raced, and other categorical differences. The concept of positive recognition therefore offers a useful tool for scholars, professionals, and democracy advocates and activists alike, for encouraging democratic encounters between people whose relations are characterized by uneven power relations and different societal positions.

The concept of 'positive recognition'

'Positive Recognition' is a theoretically informed practice-oriented approach, established in co-creative research with professionals working with children and youth in various roles in different institutional contexts (henceforth the PR approach). It has been developed since early 2010s by researchers working in the *Space and Political Agency Research Group (SPARG)* in Tampere University, Finland (Kallio & Häkli 2011, 2013, 2019; Kallio 2012, 2014, 2015, 2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022; Kallio, Stenvall, Bäcklund & Häkli 2013; Häkli & Kallio 2014, 2018; Häkli, Kallio & Korkiamäki 2015; Kallio, Häkli & Bäcklund 2015; Stenvall, Korkiamäki & Kallio 2015; Korkiamäki, Kallio & Häkli 2016; Kallio & Bartos 2017; Häkli, Korkiamäki & Kallio 2018; Millei & Kallio 2018; Stenvall 2018; Häkli, Kallio & Ruokolainen 2020; Kallio, Jokela, Kyrönviita & Taylor 2021; Kallio, Mettinen, Kalliomeri, & Stenvall 2021). In collaboration with professionals from youth and social work, early and primary education, and other fields where professionals engage with children and young people in their daily work, the research has brought together, first, scholarly understanding on political subjectivity and democracy particularly in the everyday spaces of childhood and youth, and second, professional understanding on the challenges and opportunities of child- and youth-centered operating principles and supportive measures. Children, young people and their families have also been involved in active roles, contributing to the co-creational research and development of the PR approach. This longstanding work has resulted in a theoretically grounded practical perspective for creating respectful and empowering professional relations with children and young people, as well as respectful and trustful encounters and relations-building among professionals, parents and other adults (Young et al. 2020; Stafford et al. 2021; Sime et al. 2021; Mitchell 2022). Beyond these contexts, the PR approach has been found useful for studying the dynamisms that lead to experiences of misrecognition among asylum seekers and refugees,

minorities, as well as people with disabilities in institutional as well as mundane encounters (Ryynänen & Nivala 2019; Kallio 2019; Kallio & Häkli 2019; Korkiamäki & Gilligan 2020; Nivala et al. 2022; Robinson et al. 2022). Another potential context for recognition-informed analysis is that of urban studies where minorities and other people in marginalized positions may find themselves overlooked as advocates of sustainable urban development (Kallio et al. 2021; Häkli et al. 2020).

The PR approach draws from critical democracy theory, specifically from Arendtian political philosophy and theories concerning the ethics and politics of recognition. Following Hannah Arendt's (1958, 2005) thought, 'recognition' refers to socially embedded constitutive relations between people who live together in a political community. In line with her, the key theorists Nancy Fraser (1995), Axel Honneth (1995) and Charles Taylor (1995) all take a strongly normative stance in their slightly different ways of developing the concept, acknowledging positive recognition as an ideal dynamism of democratic life. Within this philosophical terrain, the idea of civil politics aligns with that of "lived citizenship" where political life is seen to unfold in various scalar dimensions ranging from everyday environments of private life to the local community, the city, the state, and international arenas of social action (Häkli and Kallio in this volume, see also Kallio et al. 2020). In citizenship studies, Engin Isin's conceptualization of "acts of citizenship" has been influential in developing this approach where, in the spirit of positive recognition, the aim is to give visibility to people's mundane influential activities subject to normative evaluation (Isin and Nielsen 2008).

In these lines of thinking everyday democratic life can be framed through the concept of recognition as follows: When recognition is duly realized, civil politics is characterized by experienced equitability and acknowledged diversity, which maintains peace through a relatively equitable democratic order. Respectively, misrecognition leads to experiences of injustice among those oppressed by the dominating power relations that maintain biased hierarchies, which again may give rise to societal struggles. Categorical inequalities, such as racism, ageism, ethno-nationalism, sexism and religious persecution are boosted through practices of misrecognition, or even "disrecognition" where suppressive acts are intentional (Häkli et al. 2018). To support social practices where due recognition between different people takes place, the PR approach offers operational principles that set out to strengthen dignity and inclusion in political communities and encourage people's active agency in matters that they find important. Regarding democracy, the contestation of oppressive social structures and biased power relations is emphasized. Here an intergenerational dimension is pertinent: the PR approach suggests that 'aged' distinctions between people in different generational positions can be contested along with gendered, classed, raced, and other categorical differences (Kallio 2014, 2017; Kallio & Thomas 2019). From childhood and youth studies perspectives, the approach hence builds on an understanding on children and young people's different but equal capacities to act as political subjects (Kallio & Häkli 2011, 2013; Häkli & Kallio 2014, 2018). In the mundane communities where recognition is constantly given or denied, people learn from a very young age how their presence is appreciated and what the encounters of (mis)recognition mean for one's capacities to act. Moreover, even young children can learn to engage with politicized matters at broader scales – like in institutional settings or through collective public activities – if supported by the adult society through the recognition of age-specific capacities. Considering children as a "critical case", following Bent Flyvbjerg's (2001) methodological approach, this means that every human being owns such capacities (Kallio 2007).

The PR approach underlines recognition as a form of empowerment and a positive force in concrete human interactions, the success of which can only be judged contextually by the ones involved. In practical terms, it draws attention to the active agencies that people enact as part of their everyday social life. Yet the approach can also be adopted in professional practices as an informed mode of operation, when working with children and youth for instance, but also in other contexts such as elderly work, disability care, asylum and migration services, substance abuse treatment, services for homeless people, and in professional practices with other vulnerable groups. Through its reciprocal character, recognition concerns all members of such communities,

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meaning that also professionals are constantly recognized by each other and by the people whom they work with. For professional use, a framework of Positive Recognition with three interlinked principles, or facets, has been created, distinguishing between familiarization, acknowledgement, and support.

The first principle of *familiarization* is premised on the idea that, to lead to positive recognition, encounters between people should be based on willingness to meet each other as equal persons regardless of structural and subjective differences. For this to happen, professionals should be able to endorse Arendt's (1958, p.8) notion of equality: "we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who lived, lives, or will live". This means that, in a classroom for instance, children are not categorized as either normal or special, but instead every child is understood as differently unique. Similarly, the teacher has the right to be recognized as a person who, among other teachers, has a particular unique subjectivity.

Based on such familiarization, people gain the possibility to *acknowledge* each other as they wish to be seen and encountered, as persons with histories and identities that are meaningful in the specific context. This is the second principle of the PR approach: trusting relationships require mutual respect for matters that people consider particularly important in their lives. It may be that these 'importances' differ drastically, and they may even invite difference of opinion in the encounter if related to contested issues. This underlines an important point: the politics of positive recognition is not necessarily related to Habermasian consensus-building (even if it can be) but may equally connect with agonistic politics where dis-agreement is considered the highest form of democracy. Hence, in the building of respectful relations, professionals will sometimes need to step back from their normative roles and push structural power relations aside.

The third principle in Positive Recognition framework is the informed provision of *support* on the basis of mutual familiarization and acknowledgement. This facet of PR emphasizes it as a mode of operation that helps people to build trust with and reach out to each other from their own starting points, thus cultivating mutual understanding of what kind of support is appropriate and fitting in which context. When all persons involved are acknowledged for their individual differences, abilities and skills, there is a sense of collective valuing of everyone being treated equally and respectfully, as valuable members of the community. While this does not erase the inequalities related to structural social positions, it allows a contextual negotiation of the power relations through which inequalities are reproduced and actualized. Ultimately the goal is to positively recognize not only strengths and resources but also difficulties and vulnerabilities, and thus to find appropriate ways to provide support that stems from people's experienced stances.

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