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Maia, Rousiley C.M. & [Vimieiro, Ana Carolina](#)  
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## **Recognition and moral progress: a case study about discourses on disability in the media**

*Rousiley C. M. Maia*

*Ana Carolina Vimieiro*

In recent years the notion of recognition has gained a central position in debates about multiculturalism, identity politics, and the struggles of groups that are victims of poor income distribution and cultural undervaluation. Honneth's work – that has inspired much of the interest in and debate over recognition – supports the idea that an increase in both individuality and autonomy should be regarded as a 'normative progress'. The German philosopher holds that the three relations of recognition that he identifies are to be seen as normative expectations that safeguard conditions to individual autonomy and self-realization, and such expectations have emerged in the historical passage to modernity.

Claims that cultural change progresses in a particular direction are highly controversial. Some theorists argue that Honneth's program is problematic because it seeks to build an evaluative framework without taking cultural relativism and value pluralism seriously (Dütmann, 2000; Fraser, 2003; Markell, 2003). Others are skeptical about the possibility of securing normative criteria to provide a critical yardstick for the social conditions of the good life (Kalyvas, 1999; Zurn, 2000; Cooke, 2006) while some argue that Honneth's recognitive norms do not provide coherent moral guidance for citizens challenging the social order (Fraser, 2003, p. 222-233). In such a debate, Honneth (2002, p. 518) is fully aware that he is 'confronted ... with problems that are difficult to solve'.

This article argues that some critics do not do full justice to Honneth's ideas. We address Honneth's discussions of moral progress under conditions of value-pluralism as well as his discussions of processes of social learning. It must be clear that we have no intention to develop a normative-theoretical argument to assess his thesis. Our aim is much more modest. Using the example of a case study – public interpretations of the issue of disability built over four decades in major Brazilian newspapers – we seek to show that Honneth's ideas can be fruitfully applied to empirical research. We argue that his theory can sharpen our thinking on a number of points to critically examine claims of injustice that have historically been raised (including the normative presupposition within them) as well as real efforts to change the social order on those grounds.

The analysis developed in this paper may be disconcerting for at least two reasons. First, moral progress is one of social philosophy's most unsettled and problematic issues. As already mentioned, we do not make any claim to explore the issue of moral progress as

professional philosophers, but rather take the perspective of empirical researchers. We attempt to investigate historical transformations of discourses regarding people with impairment. We will do this through the concept of frame in the media arena; and we will explore justification for changing social arrangements in Brazilian society. Since our study is located in a particular society, we acknowledge that we will inevitably measure certain proposed policies on disability in a specific historical context.

The second difficulty we face is that problems of moral and social philosophy are not always easily connected to sociological and political investigation. The level of sophistication and erudition shown by Honneth clearly go beyond our ability to translate abstract concepts into operational forms for the purpose of empirical analysis. However, in agreement with Honneth, we understand that ‘social reality must be described in a way that shows how norms and principles considered justified could already have become socially valid’ (Honneth, 2003b, p. 257). We understand that evaluative perceptions of a given social phenomenon cannot be based only on empirical data, but must instead mobilize normative standards and values. Thus, we contend that Honneth’s normative theory can offer not only guidance for empirical observation but also tell us something about how we can evaluate our findings according to certain standard.

Our findings show moral progress on the issue of disability in the media arena, in that institutional innovations have been justified through reference to the ideas of individuality and social inclusiveness. Supporting Honneth’s argument, we conclude that although a set of Brazilian institutions have attempted to re-organize themselves to follow the inclusion principles in varied ways, there remains disagreement and moral conflict across several policy fields and a wide range of criticism on the oppressive nature of some social arrangements. The ‘ideal of inclusion’ provided by international entities and by disabled people movements is far more demanding than the achievements made by local institutions. Viewed in this way, political critique advanced by these actors helps uncover potentialities for recognition improvement.

This paper is structured as follows. In the first section, we survey the major problems surrounding the notion of moral progress in Honneth’s program. In the second section, we provide an overview of the legal norms aiming to assure rights and promote inclusion of people with impairment in order to contextualize our case study in Brazilian society. We describe our methodology, coding procedures and results in the third section. In the fourth section, we discuss our results in the light of some normative controversies such as a) the notion of progress as a directional process; b) the problem of value pluralism and conflicts of

interest and c) the processes of social learning. In the conclusion, we point out some implications of our empirical findings for the debate on moral progress and transformation of recognitional attitudes.

### **Controversies regarding the notion of moral progress**

Honneth interprets the implementation of principle of universal equality of all individuals as a normative progression. As a consequence of modernity, the articulation of a legal-social order that grants the extension of rights to an ever greater number of individuals has institutionalized the conditions that safeguard individual autonomy and self-realization. The legal sphere of recognition allows people to be recognized as having ‘equal status’ (not ‘different identity’ as assumed by some commentators) and to understand themselves as free subjects and equal legal citizens. While sharing this basic premise with many democratic thinkers, including Habermas, to justify individual civil liberties and equal opportunities for political participation in a democratic order, Honneth adds to this formulation the idea of two other forms of intersubjective recognition. Love and esteem, that have an individualized basis, orient specific modes to one’s relation-to-self and also several social relations that enable or impede self-realization. According to Honneth (2002, p.511), the three relations of recognition create normative expectations that are seen not as ‘an ahistorical *given*’ but as result of a ‘directional *process*’.

The idea of moral progress as a ‘directional process’ in Honneth’s research program is a much-debated issue (Dütmann, 2000; Fraser, 2003; Markell, 2003). Let us provide a caveat at once since it would be inaccurate to describe Honneth’s notion of progress as a universal history of human progress and perfection of society by eliminating value pluralism. Value pluralism is a kernel notion in various traditions of thought, during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Honneth is fully aware that in post-traditional societies, with the demise of religious and metaphysical references, group specific values are now fragmented and pluralized. Social order is open to conflict and continuous social questioning and thus social integration results from undetermined compromises between social forces and groups. Social struggles emerge when the dominated – referring to all oppressed and marginalized groups, and not just the proletarian movement – challenge the values and the justifications legitimating the present social order and contest domination. Therefore, the very notion of struggle for recognition can be interpreted as a competition of multiple claims regarding valuable human qualities and ways to achieve self-realization.

Several scholars have argued that principles of recognition would have normative value only to a single culture (Kalyvas, 1999; Düttmann, 2000; Fraser, 2003). We acknowledge the complexity of the issue here, but it would be misleading to equate the notion of progress with culturally specific commitments. Honneth stresses that he speaks of ‘autonomy’ and ‘self-realization’ ‘in the most neutral sense possible’ (Honneth, 2002, p. 515). Elsewhere, Honneth (2003b, p. 256-265; 1996, p.144) claims that he attempts to build a ‘formal conception of ethical life’ – an articulation of Kant and Hegel’s moral philosophy – to avoid privileging any specific concept of the good. In his reading of Hegel, Honneth argues that the struggle for recognition is the dynamic historical force moving the normative development of society. Higher stages of social organization were the enabling conditions for the institutionalization of recognition relations which allowed the development of subjective liberty and autonomy. In accordance with neo-Kantianism, Honneth attempts to explicate normative standards of evaluation that are neither culturally nor socially contingent, but that make it possible for members of various forms of life to freely express their differences and pursue cultural ways of self-realization. According to Jean-Philippe Deranty (2009, p. 294) such a ‘Kantian moment’ in Honneth’s thinking, allows this philosopher to develop, like Habermas, an ‘interpretation of the modern rule of law, as an order ideally conceived by a community of equal co-legislators’. In the same vein, Zurn (2010, p. 5) has remarked that the recognition theory ‘gives a distinctive twist’ to the neo-Kantian analysis of the institutions of constitutional democracy that safeguard individual autonomy by understanding them neither as a result of a hypothetical social contract nor as a consequence of an abstract cognitive rationality but as the outcome of historical struggles that can be rationally reconstructed. In Honneth’s (2002, p. 515-516) words, ‘a formal concept of “autonomy” or “self-realization” should rather let differences come to the fore regarding the various cultural ways of realizing, within history, the *telos* of a relation-to-self that is free from domination or compulsion’.

A number of objections can be raised here. For example, Düttmann (2000, p. 151) and Markell (2003, p. 23) are particularly dissatisfied with the notion of moral progress and the perfection of moral action based on the *telos* of full recognition because it arguably eliminates tensions and creates a mirage of general agreement. In Düttmann’s words, such an ideal projects a ‘complete’ and ‘successful’ stage ‘freed of all tensions and contradictions’ (Düttmann, 2000, p. 151). To be sure, Honneth understands that throughout modernity the social order has been reshaped towards more equality – that is, greater numbers of areas of subjective life have become protected by rights and an ever greater number of individuals benefit from autonomy and liberty. Because subject formation and social integration are

intimately linked, this means both an expansion of subjective identity features, as well as an expansion of recognition at the social level (Deranty, 2009, p. 277). However, Honneth neither eliminates conflict or social struggle from social life nor does he endorse the view that moral progress conduces to a harmonious condition of perfect understanding.

A fuller and more nuanced understanding of progress at stake here requires us to take into consideration the following aspects of Honneth's theory: a) the characterization of recognition norms by a 'normative surplus'; b) the differentiation between the process of internal evolution in the lives of institutions and the process of external contestation; c) the account of the effort to overcome discrepancies between the ideal and the practice as a social learning process.

First, differently from positivist thinkers who hold that advances converge on principles that are already fully substantiated, Honneth (2002, p. 517; 2003a, p. 186) claims that norms of recognition are characterized by a 'normative surplus'. This means that recognition principles have a validity potential that goes beyond the existing social order. In Honneth's (2003a, p. 143) words, 'Love ..., the equality principle... and the achievement principle..... represent normative perspectives with reference to which subjects can reasonably argue that existing forms of recognition are inadequate or insufficient and need to be expanded'. Following the desideratum of critical theory, emancipatory impulses are seen to be located immanently in the actual world of social relations. As Deranty has observed, the normative surplus enables 'one ...[to] say that the principles already exist. But they exist as grounds for the rejection of injustice, not as realisations of a potential for full rationality' (Deranty, 2009, p. 398; see also Zurn, 2010, p. 11). Under favorable circumstances, social agents can reflexively employ principles of recognition to identify pathologies in social arrangements and rely on them to make their claims that institutions and social relations are one-sided or restricted and then need to be expanded and further developed. Viewed from this perspective, one can talk about moral progress while preserving the view of perpetuity of social struggle as constitutive of social life.

Second, the ideal of full recognition – that is, all people both fully individuated and perfectly included – is best understood as a regulative ideal. This ideal, although never accomplished in the real world, orients practices of contestation. It can be read as 'imaginative projection', as Cooke (2006, 2009) has argued, that 'gradually opens up ways of innovative interpretation without ever being completely or finally determinate' (Cooke, 2006, p. 65). The tensions between the confrontation of demands aimed at the internal life of institutions and the experiences of injustice and expectations that point beyond the existing

order imply that full, mutual, recognition is never realized in any particular reality (Honneth, 2002, p. 516; 2003b, p. 262-263). Struggles for recognition never end and practices of recognition are dynamic relations – even when social relations of recognition are achieved and institutionalized, they are always subject to new contestation.

Third, Honneth argues that the ethical knowledge through which we value potential qualities in others and develop appropriately rational patterns of recognition should be understood as a learning process that is part of the historical process itself. These patterns of recognition – acquired through socialization – while forming ‘ethical certitudes’ in the background of our lifeworld, need constantly to be actualized in acts of recognition. While Honneth (2002, p. 512) agrees that the ‘space of reasons’ in a given society changes dynamically, he adds that ‘what we then do, in such acts of recognition, involves publicly making explicit the knowledge that we have acquired in the process of socialization’. On these grounds, he defends the idea that within the relations of recognition there is a continuous demand to further perfect our moral action. As a consequence, the historical attempt to overcome *de facto* practices and the ideal norms – the claims of injustice that have been historically raised and the real attempt to change social arrangements on that basis — sets in motion a ‘permanent pressure to learn’ (Honneth, 2002, p. 516).

We understand that Honneth’s endeavor to provide conceptual tools for cross-cultural and transhistorical criticism is hard to achieve. We agree with Zurn’s (2000, p. 119) argument that ‘there is the perennial difficulty of drawing an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’’. We accept that Honneth’s remarks on the ‘validity surplus’ do not put an end to the problem of validity of the three normative expectations of recognition in a context transcending sense, and that his theory of collective learning is underdeveloped (Cooke, 2006, p. 66-67). Still, we advocate that Honneth’s program can be fruitfully applied to empirical research; it allows us to ask both empirical and normative questions on historical transformations in recognitional attitudes towards marginalized people, and emancipatory achievements of disadvantaged groups in contemporary politics. To carry out our study, we do not need to assume that Honneth’s theory exhausts the terrain of all possible normative criteria to provide a critical yardstick for the social conditions of the good life, neither that his idea of good society is ethically superior to the ideas evoked by other contemporary critical social theorists.

### **Legislation and disability**

The theme of disability – although often neglected within studies of recognition

(Danermark and Gellerstedt, 2004; Calder, 2011, p. 107) – seems very suitable for exploring the issue of recognition and moral progress. Despite the existence of people with impairment in all societies and in all times, a systematic political and social theorization about these groups of people has emerged only in the last four decades, led chiefly by scholars with disabilities (Thomas, 2004, p. 570, see also Terzi, 2004, p. 141; Smith, 2005, p. 554). Furthermore, disabled people's activism and rights movements have been successful in shaping international conventions and legislation in several countries in a relatively short period of time (Oliver and Barnes, 1998; Santos, 2001; Oliver, 1996; Smith, 2005, p. 555; Swain, French and Barnes, 2004). Following the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, several treaties and international conventions have emphasized the dignity, inherent value, and equal and inalienable rights of persons with disabilities. Among important initiatives to establish principles and actions to guide national policies stand out: UN declaration for the International Year of Disabled Persons (1981); UN Decade of Disabled Persons (1983); ILO Convention no. 159 (1983), and UN Rules on Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1994). The latter elaborates the requirements, rules, and measures for implementing equal participation of persons with disabilities in systems such as education, work, social security, family life, culture and leisure. The recent UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2007) clearly defines the duties of the State and the rights of persons with disabilities, seeking thereby to overcome the social divides and marginalization that affect such persons.

Brazil has been internationally acknowledged as a country with one of the most advanced laws in this area. The 1988 Constitution is considered quite inclusive and the Federal Law no. 7,853 (1989) is the first nationwide law establishing that prejudice against persons with disabilities is a crime. The OAS Guatemala Convention (1999) for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities, held to be a key point in this process, has been law in Brazil since 2001. The resolution no. 2 (2001), by the National Education Council (Conselho Nacional de Educação) adopted a clear inclusive perspective to shape national education policies. Since then, several other resolutions have been published on specific topics, such as priority service, social support, professional rehabilitation, quotas, transport, accessibility, and recognition of the Libras language as a legal form of communication. In Brazil, as in many other countries, juridical regulations favoring people with disabilities are to a large degree the result of struggles and successful campaigns for rights promoted by many civil society groups, NGOs, and academics (Figueira, 2008; Sasaki, 1997).



## **Methodology: an indirect analysis of media frames**

To investigate discourses in the media on the issue of disability, we adopted the concept of frame and accompanying methods from the field of frame analysis. In their famous work analyzing news content on nuclear power, Gamson and Modigliani (1989, p. 3) have stated that frames are ‘central organizing ideas’ for making sense of and interpreting issues, by showing certain associations of elements in social reality. A frame is an abstract construct, meaningful collectively shared patterns or structures which, in Goffman’s terms, helps us to ‘locate, perceive, identify and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its limits’ (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). These organizing principles are usually implicit within the messages, and are expressed in the form of attributions of specific causes and solutions to given issues, slogans, metaphors, among other modes (Entman, 1993, 2004; Matthes and Kohring, 2008).

One of the inherent difficulties of frame analysis – taken as abstract constructs – is how to operationalize them for empirical research (Matthes and Kohring, 2008; Matthes, 2009; Reese, 2007). Scholars in this area have used data reduction techniques (dividing frames into representative categories), in order to produce more reliable studies (Matthes and Kohring, 2008; Vimieiro and Maia, 2011). In our case, we have adopted similar procedures to those of Matthes and Kohring (2008). We have also followed the indications provided by Gamson and Modigliani (1989) and Entman (1993, 2004) to define analytical categories that, taken together, are able to evince frames in the text. Our study is then based on indirect frame analysis, as the frames are generated from interpretative packages or sets of devices that express frames in the messages.

Table 1 presents our set of elements used in an empirical analysis of news:<sup>1</sup>

Insert Table 1 here

### *Sample and analysis units*

Our empirical sample consists of news stories published in major Brazilian newspapers – *Folha de S.Paulo* and *O Globo* – as well as in a newsweekly *Veja*. The analysis

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<sup>1</sup> The methodological procedures that were used in the survey are discussed in detail in Vimieiro and Maia (2011).

period encompasses 1960 to 2008<sup>2</sup>, which is compatible with the moment when the idea of disability started to be thematized publicly in Brazil (Figueira, 2008; Sasaki, 1997). It would be impossible, however, to investigate all the news about disability published across 38 years, particularly because most of this material has not been digitized. Thus, we divided the *corpus* into eight-year intervals and gathered news from two months in each of these years from both newspapers, as follows: 1960, 1968, 1976, 1984, 1992, 2000, and 2008. We searched the entire 12 months in the newsweekly, as its content was digitized.

After the non-digitized material had been manually clipped and the digitized material searched<sup>3</sup>, we ended up with 364 news texts.

### *Coding*

Our unit of analysis was the news story and the coding procedure was done in three stages. At first, we created codes referring to the frame elements and to possible variables found in a first detailed reading of the material as well as in other sources on disability. Next, the codebook was reduced by clustering similar variables into broader variables to improve the classification method. Finally, we analyzed the data cross-sectionally and discarded the variables with less than at least a 5% recurrence rate, as Matthes and Kohring (2008) have recommended. A reliability test<sup>4</sup> of the sample was conducted in 10% of texts, and we reached a 0.70 agreement rate in the coding made by two coders.

### **Data processing**

Following the coding procedures, data were processed using *RapidMiner* program. We applied data clustering techniques, bringing together news with similar elements and generating sets of those with greater internal similarity. The purpose of clustering was to form sets that differed as much as possible from each other. Thus, we could identify, at each moment of history, news with similar patterns or groups with common recurring elements over time.

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<sup>2</sup> The *Veja* magazine enters our study in 1968 when it is launched.

<sup>3</sup> Our survey found 158 search items for commonly used words and expressions to denote persons with disabilities or specific types of disabilities, or popularly recognized acronyms and names of entities involved with this topic.

<sup>4</sup> In this test, which is aimed to measure the inter-coder reliability, we used  $\alpha$  coefficient proposed by Krippendorff (2003). Two observers, who worked independently – based on the same instructions of the codebook (created beforehand) – attributed codes to the news stories under analysis.

We analyzed the social and historical context to label the frames in each set based on the most evident features of each group. A few frames – such as the medical frame – occurred in several years; thus, the interpretative analysis enabled us to discern important differences in the construction of meaning in these frames over time.

### **Empirical results**

Figure 1 presents the frame chart per year along the period under research, including the percentage of news in each frame in the corresponding year:

Insert Figure 1 here

In summary, we may divide public discourses on the topic of disability in the media into two phases: a) one that extends from the 60's through the 70's, when the integrative model is the central approach through frames of a charitable behavior towards people with disabilities and a medical perspective on impairment; at this point, disability is viewed as a problem of the individual; b) a second period from the 80's to nowadays, when the perspective of human rights gains strength and the notion of inclusiveness becomes central through frames of accessibility, quality of life, limitations and abilities, and denouncements of prejudice, among others; in this phase, people with disability are regarded as persons who do not enjoy yet equal rights and society is responsible for overcoming barriers that obstruct their autonomous living. The interpretation of the results intended to answer the following questions: can eventual changes in the view of impairment and in policies on disability be justified through reference to the ideas of social inclusiveness and individuality? Is it possible to identify in the mass media arena an agonistic confrontation of demands for recognition aimed at the national institutions? Can we speak in terms of collective learning regarding the issue of disability?

### **Can eventual changes in the view of impairment and in policies on disability be justified through reference to the ideas of social inclusiveness and individuality?**

The prominence of 'medical frames', 'work frames' and 'education frames' in the first phase show a concern for 'integration' of people with disability in society as a means to combat 'segregation'. Traditional segregation of people with impairment had infused feelings of ignorance and fear, and thus integrative policies aimed to abolish barriers to acceptance and

bring people into society. Regarding the sphere of intimate relations, we find several appeals in the news to treat the ‘retarded child’ and the ‘mental deficient’ with love, kindness, and patience. For instance, a news article announces an awareness campaign – entitled ‘The retarded child can be helped’, launched by the Governor of Rio de Janeiro in 1960 – aiming to ‘draw the general public and the official authorities’ attention to several problems experienced by these children and their need for treatment and education’<sup>5</sup>. In another article, a specialist mentioned that ‘treatment of the retarded people requires patience, perseverance and love as well as tranquil discipline and energy’. He recommended that ‘one should not regard them with pity and complaint, but instead make a real effort to obtain benefit from what remains unaffected by their defect and recover what is possible’<sup>6</sup>. While regarding disability as a personal tragedy, several speakers in the news media are concerned with that disabled people grow up in an environment marked by ‘indifference, fear and hostility’ that severely damages their possibilities of ‘recovery’.

The chances of recovery are zero: they [the exceptional children] are not ready for life in society and do not learn a useful job at the right time “People should understand that the exceptional need care and sympathy”, says the president of the Association of Parents and Friends of the Exceptional, Ignês Félix Pacheco de Britto, who coordinates the three APAE units in Rio de Janeiro among the 300 units this entity has throughout the country. (The opportunity to treat the mentally deficient at APAE schools) (O Globo, 21 November 1976).

The integration perspective tends to view impairment as a physical defect – that is, a restriction or a lack of ability to perform an activity in a normal manner (Terzi, 2004, p. 141). Therefore, any policy is likely to focus on reducing or eliminating physical segregation alone – and providing adequate health care, education and training for ‘recovering’ or ‘resettling’ disabled people to live in society. In the news surveyed in this period, the notion of education is related to training, in addition ‘to surgery, medical treatment and correction of defects’ – a view expressed by a specialist in the following article:

Depending on the case of each retarded child – adds professor Elso Arruda – one has to think of education to cultivate the intellectual, social and moral potentialities of these children, to correct antisocial and abnormal tendencies by teaching and discipline, and to provide them with all possible knowledge within the possibilities of each case. Training at home, school, or at specialized institutions aims to introduce useful automatisms [sic], hygiene and feeding habits, and to correct their gait, language, and sense organs. The three Rs program (repetition, relaxation and routine) should be followed strictly [...](‘The treatment of retarded children requires patience,

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<sup>5</sup> *O Globo*, 20 August 1960.

<sup>6</sup> *Folha de S.Paulo*, 16 August 1960.

discipline and love’) (*Folha de S. Paulo*, 16 August, 1960)

The concept of work is related to occupational therapy or to the performance of simple and programmed activities, such as handcrafts and the assemblage of products, carried out in protected environments that are not regulated by the labor market.

Rehabilitating the incapable requires a dedicated facility equipped with the indispensable means to apply surgical and clinical techniques, as well as occupation therapy, trained and able people to deal with the incapable to process their adaptation or reeducation, rehabilitating and restoring them for useful activities in society. (A modern facility for rehabilitating the incapable) (*O Globo*, 25 July 1960)

The integration approach has been severely criticized from the mid 1970’s onwards. Although the integrative model claims to offer disabled people the opportunity to take part in society, critics contest that their promises are not fulfilled; this model is seen to promote further forms of oppression and exclusion. First, critics have claimed that social integration is based on the concept of ‘normalization’ that requires people with disability to ‘conform’ to the standards of non-disabled people, by ‘assimilating’ the terms and conditions which currently exist within a given society (Oliver, 1996; Northway, 1997, p. 159). Second, some scholars argue that this model ascribes a very passive role to people with disabilities – viewed as an object of solutions posed in terms of medical cure or charitable assistance. As Northway has put it ‘If the “problem” resides in the individual rather than in society then the “solution” is for the individual to work towards normality in so far as this is possible’ (Northway, 1997, p. 163; see also Cole, 2007). Third, critics hold that the integrative model restricts the choices of disabled people – by assuming that people with impairment should achieve happiness and self-realization only in the normal community; and thus overlooking their eventual frustration with integration and the blocking of their opportunities for self-determination. Fourth, this model is regarded as prone to perpetuate exclusion because integration policies give technical responses to impairment and do not challenge the *status quo*; it rather sustains values and social norms that lead primarily to the devaluation of people with disabilities.

In the second phase in our study case, we note that speakers in the news media from 1984 onwards start using frames of rights, frames of accessibility, frames of active social life, and frames of quality of life, when discussing issues related to people with disability. This change can be explained by the rise of the ‘social relational understanding of disability’ in the mid 1970’s and the ‘social model’ in the 1990’s – promoted by organizations of disabled people and activist scholars of disability studies – with the ‘explicit commitment to assist

disabled people in their fight for full equality and social inclusion' (Thomas, 2004, p.570, see also Terzi, 2004, p.141; Smith, 2005, p.554). Such a perspective, despite encompassing different chains of thought<sup>7</sup>, has significantly influenced educational and social policies on inclusion in several countries.

Our findings show that people with disability also become sources of news stories from the 1980's onwards. This is theoretically and politically important because it enables the public to also understand disability from a perspective informed by disabled people's reflections on their own experience. In several articles, people with impairment address the issue of oppression and discrimination embedded in institutions and in socio-cultural practices. In the extract below from the 1980's, a speaker clearly expresses that discrimination and oppression undermined her psycho-emotional well-being. She had become disabled nine years before 'because of one these accidents' and says that 'after a tremendous struggle with herself to achieve the goal to start living again in spite of being disabled'. The current view of impairment as a tragic personal loss and the way non-disabled people see persons with impairments are condemned as profoundly disabling:

I feel that people see something strange in us, the disabled, a unique difference as if part of the reasoning mechanism to attain a precise judgment of things and events is missing. And this part is the disability (which may happen to anyone, and which nobody wants) in the sense that society traditionally is set relative to us: we only receive alms but no rights. – Mrs. Cintia de Souza Clausell. ('The disabled, something strange') (*Folha de S. Paulo*, 12 January 1984)

This speaker in the news media also uses the language of rights to vocalize what should be done to alleviate barriers that restrict disabled people's chances to enjoy life and achieve self-realization:

I have written to the media to support our struggle to attain rights. The most important battle is to achieve – for all of us – better rehabilitation, public transport, work, elimination of barriers, leisure, etc. In other words, improvements for this huge minority consisting of 13 million disabled persons. I am fighting and experiencing the struggle. How? By claiming our rights relative to cars parked on sidewalks, on pedestrian crossings, and for public transport to take us to rehabilitation centers, work, and leisure. – Mrs. Cintia de Souza Clausell (The disabled, something strange) (*Folha*

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<sup>7</sup> Challenging the medical view, some scholars within this approach seek to understand disability from a relational perspective to explain social exclusions experienced by disabled people (Thomas, 1999, 2004), while others hold, in a more radical fashion, that disability is socially caused and has nothing do with the body (Oliver, 1996; Finkelstein, 2004; Cole, 2007).

de S. Paulo, 12 January 1984)

On the same wavelength as the ‘social model’ perspective, speakers in the news begin to shift the ‘problem’ of disability from the individual towards the structure of society, that is, institutional forms of exclusion and cultural marginalization. Leaders of social movements, people with impairments, some specialists and moral entrepreneurs claim that people with disabilities cannot be treated as second class citizens; they have the right to the same opportunities as other citizens to participate in social activities– in labor markets, educational institutions, transport, communication and other public and private services, including participation in collective decision making.

Special attention should be given to the ‘frame of rights’ in the news media in this phase because claims based on rights imply the conviction that society owes respect to people with disability as morally or politically autonomous and potentially capable of co-determining how they want to live among other citizens. In 2008, one news story entitled ‘Respect and Inclusion’ announced that the Brazilian National Congress had ratified the UN – ‘Convention on the Rights of People with Disability’. This was celebrated as a means to ‘empower disabled people’s banner and cause’:

This important, promising and unheard of decision (over three fifths voted Yes) raises the terms of the treaty to a dimension of constitutional equivalence. It means that the State and society are compelled – and under even more healthy pressure – to enforce the Higher Law. This assures rights to 15.4% of our population, people who daily face huge difficulties in the harsh and complex search for quality of life and social inclusion (Right and Inclusion) (*O Globo*, 11 July 2008)

In the legal sphere, the institutionalization of rights enables disabled people and those who speak on their behalf to advance their demands – based on reasons that can be articulated through reference to mutual recognition. The representatives and policy-makers are then made accountable to change the physical environment that previously fit the needs of non-disabled people as well as to incentivize deconstructing social value hierarchies that underscore social exclusion practices. In the above-mentioned news story, the journalist uses the issue of ‘accessibility’ to explain the political question at stake:

If it is right and legitimate that persons with impairment be offered tools for better personal mobility, then the states should implement concrete measures to overcome hurdles of all kinds. This novel approach is not limited to individual success in overcoming the limitations of his or her physical setting. The focus broadens, and the social setting itself is now responsible for bringing down these hurdles. As a

consequence, public powers will be compelled to set aside resources in the budget for this end. (Respect and Inclusion) (O Globo, 11 July 2008)

Based on Honneth's theory, claims of rights can be best understood as a reflection of expectation in the legal sphere, anticipating that political commitments should ensure both increased equality and inclusion. When disabled people regard themselves right holders they expect to be recognized as capable of making their own decisions; and thus as morally responsible to demand from their political representatives what they need to both develop their particularized identity and to become full participants in collective life. This explains the emergence of frames of accessibility, frames of active social life, and frames of quality of life in this period.

Regarding health care, it should be noted that the medical frame is prominent during all years under analysis. However, while in the first phase there is a concern with 'surgery', 'rehabilitation' and 'training' to seek cure, as already mentioned, in the second phase there is a concern with prevention, early diagnosis and assistance following the logic: 'For each patient, a different treatment'<sup>8</sup>. We find reports on clinics for people with disabilities that have been reshaped to provide assistance and services beyond physical care: 'the patients count also on the support of psychologists and occupational therapists to help them to live better with their families, overcoming the stigma of disability'. In the work domain, we have frequently observed pieces of news expressing a common concern with policies to 'overcome barriers' and 'prejudices' for people with disability finding real opportunities 'to ascend normally in their self-chosen careers'<sup>9</sup> in sectors organized by the labor market. Furthermore, there have been news stories from the 2000's onwards informing the public about changes in social arrangements to provide appropriate access for disabled people, such as bars and restaurants providing their menu in braille<sup>10</sup>; dealers offering 'discounts on cars adapted to fit the needs of people with impairments'<sup>11</sup>; as well as news highlighting a 'new market sector' for people with disability and thereby forming a promising group of consumers<sup>12</sup>. In this second phase, our data show that people with disability are not simply brought to society as it used to be organized; but a set of institutions has been modified to promote expanded forms of inclusion. Thus, there are good grounds for thinking that these changes have increased the variety of ways through which disabled people can achieve self-realization; and have

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<sup>8</sup> *O Globo*, 14 May 2000.

<sup>9</sup> *O Globo*, 29 March 1992.

<sup>10</sup> *Folha de S. Paulo*, 20 May 2000.

<sup>11</sup> *Folha de S. Paulo*, 11 Jun 2000.

<sup>12</sup> *O Globo*, 27 July 2008.



multiplied the possibilities for them to co-operate in social arrangements and to contribute to society.

To sum up, our findings show that broader cultural transformations of valuable human qualities of people with disabilities and changes in policies – examined across four decades in the Brazilian news – can be justified through reference to the ideas of social inclusiveness and individuality. In the next section, we will discuss the agonistic dimension in the struggle for recognition of disabled people, focusing on problems of value pluralism, moral dissent and conflicts of interest.

### **Is it possible to identify in the mass media arena an agonistic confrontation of demands for recognition aimed at the national institutions?**

Although Brazilian legal framework has endorsed the ideal of democratic inclusion and many institutions have been re-organizing themselves to follow the inclusion principles in a great variety of ways (Pereira, 2001), people with disabilities claim that they are currently excluded from many aspects of society. Two complementary reasons explain this. First, the move from the ‘integration’ to the ‘inclusion’ perspective in disability politics cannot be regarded as a linear process – the goals of some reforms remain attached to the ‘normalization’ logic; some policies and provisions are still seen as a means to stigmatize and further exclude disabled people; and there remain societal attitudes that devalue people with disability. Second, the interpretation and application of principles of recognition, as Honneth (2003a, p. 186) claims elsewhere, is not self-evident or conflict-free but it frequently raises controversies in each particular situation. Accordingly, the formulation and implementation of inclusive policies usually unleashes contestation and dispute within and between specific groups of people with disability and other groups in society that claim that they are adversely affected. Moreover, new scientific discoveries related to certain kinds of disability constantly trigger off discussion of different types of technical responses, their possible impact on affected people and their social implications. Therefore, it is not surprising that, although we have noticed that there is a direction to moral progress on the issue of disability in the Brazilian news media, public interpretations are pervaded with multiple conflicts along the four decades under analysis.

The first source of conflict we noticed in the news media arena is related to fragmentation of perspectives and controversies among policy-makers and specialists, as well as among people with disabilities, who hold group-specific values and interests. For example,

we observed an intensified dispute from the 1980's onwards about what 'inclusion' means in each and every situation. Because people with impairment regard their own experience of disability (and their relation with society) in distinct ways, they express different needs arising from these differences. Even if disabled people share a critical rejection of marginalization and social exclusion, they hold different positions about medical responses and recommendations, and ways of providing personal assistance or independent living. Good examples are APAE (Association of Parents and Friends of the Exceptional) which does not endorse the view that all children with disabilities – with different degrees of learning difficulties and mental illness – should be included in regular schools rather than in special educational establishments. Also FENEIS (National Federation for the Education and Integration of Deaf People) defends the implementation of special programs in organizations properly fitted for the education of deaf children. Particularly in the second phase of our research, we find a wide range of demands of people with impairment to accommodate new aspirations or interests that also may be defended through appeals to principles, values and goods.

Second, we observe a clash of agonistic interpretations of key societal norms in the media arena. Claims for recognition, as Honneth says elsewhere, challenge the way that society is currently organized and the hierarchy of values is structured. The demands to alter the distribution of resources, respect or prestige imbricate, in a complex way, with the prevailing organization of the relations of economic, social and political power. For example, the project of implementing inclusive education implied also demands for alterations in relations linked to economic power (such as incentives to grant access to public and private education, employment, promotions, etc.), to legal organization (such as implementation of a quota system) or to political power (such as redefinitions of *who* is entitled to new policies of redistribution of resources and opportunities). Oliver has acutely observed that both the 'new' integration and the 'new' inclusion of people with disabilities need always 'be struggled for' (Oliver, 1996). In this sense, we noticed that struggles for recognition provoked moral disagreement and conflict of interest among several groups in Brazilian society over the entire period under analysis.

A third source of conflicts observed in the news media is related to public contestation of flaws and shortcomings in the already institutionalized norms and policies addressed to people with disabilities. The current criticism of the quota system of employment for persons with impairments, legally regulated in Brazil since 1991, is a typical example of struggles of the 'third sphere of recognition', according to Honneth. In spite of regarding themselves as

right holders, disabled people are permanently struggling to re-negotiate social valuation of their individual abilities and achievements. In several pieces of news, different speakers – particularly social workers, people with impairment and leaders of movements – claim that although people with disability have been employed via the quota system, they ‘perform less valued activities’, the work environment is not properly adapted to their special needs, the recruiting team is frequently insensitive to their particular demands, and they are often fired for not ‘corresponding to the expectations’ of the companies<sup>13</sup>. In one news story, a journalist mentions that public officers have been monitoring the policy of quota for people with disabilities more intensively, but ‘the lack of opportunity and prejudices are the main barriers faced by people with disability ... [and] even those who hold high degrees face these difficulties’<sup>14</sup>. In keeping with Honneth, we can say that struggles for recognition, as dynamic relations, never reach a final point - even when principles of recognition are institutionalized, they are open to new contestations that rights, policies, duties and powers are somehow restrictive or fail to acknowledge certain needs, claims and abilities.

Our findings show that the idea of moral progress, as defended by Honneth, is compatible with value pluralism and conflict of interest in complex societies. Here we recall Honneth’s (2003a) and Cooke’s (2006, 2009) argument that the ideal of full recognition, although it will never be completely fulfilled or determined in a final way – opens up modes of innovative interpretation of ways of perfecting forms of recognition.

### **Can we speak in terms of collective learning regarding the issue of disability?**

In the previous sections, we have attempted to show that it is possible to observe moral progress towards patterns of social inclusiveness and individuality of people with disability in Brazilian society. We have also attempted to evince an ongoing agonistic competition of multiple claims for recognition of people with impairment in the media arena; and that moral conflict and social strife cannot be avoided throughout the four decades under examination. Now, taking into consideration that social integration results from undetermined compromises between many groups and social forces, we ask what it means exactly to speak in terms of social learning in the case of people with disability in the Brazilian context.

Honneth (2002, p. 512) says that ethical knowledge through which we value potential qualities in others and develop appropriately rational patterns of recognition is acquired

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<sup>13</sup> *Folha de S.Paulo*, 17 August 2008.

<sup>14</sup> *Folha de S.Paulo*, 17 August 2008.

through socialization, and this should be understood as a learning process that is part of the historical process itself. Although Honneth's theory of collective learning is underdeveloped, his proposition that patterns of recognition form 'ethical certitudes' in the background of our lifeworld seems to provide a cogent explanation of why many moral achievements seem 'invisible' or go unnoticed when one looks at current relations of (mis) recognition at a given moment in time.

To develop this point, it is worth recalling a number of objections that have been raised by recent studies about representation of disability in the mass media. Research carried out in Brazil by ANDI – Brazilian News Agency for Children's rights – and the Brazilian Bank Foundation examined 1992 pieces of news on the issue of disability published in 53 major Brazilian newspapers in 2002. This study concluded that Brazilian journalists were not acquainted with the principles, values and policies of inclusion; they often used the term 'inclusion' interchangeably with 'integration' and they could not critically assess problems and flaws in practices that contradicted the inclusive ideals (Vivarta, 2003). Furthermore, the study argued that journalists, while giving prominent attention to issues of accessibility and work for people with disability, tended to focus on physical barriers and technological innovations alone, hereby neglecting the nuances of conditions across cognitive, physical and sensory impairments. The media agents – so the authors contend – neither paid attention to the complexities of different groups of people with disability nor to important questions such as enablement practices for enhancing their family life and sexual life. In addition, this study showed that the explicit portrayal of people with impairment as right holders appeared only in a minority of news stories (16%) - this representation could not be identified in the majority of pieces of news (74%) and the stigmatized view of disabled people as wanting, pitiable victims or outcasts was rare (3.1%). This study concluded basically that journalists assumed mostly a 'common sense' perspective to approach the universe of disability.

The discrepancies between ANDI's conclusions and our own findings can be explained by some obvious and not so obvious reasons. First, our research surveyed four decades of media coverage on disability issues and could grasp a cultural change in the portrayal of people with impairment and in the patterns of justifications underscoring disability policies, while the ANDI study examined pieces of news disseminated in one single year. The objections raised by the ANDI study take the form of understandable worries about the deficits of the media coverage from the standpoint of inclusive ideals and the human rights perspective. If we recall the historical transformation from 1960 to 2008 in the understandings of impairment, the vocabularies used to refer to people with disability, and the legal norms

and concrete policies implemented with the aim to enable people with impairment to take part in society, much of the pessimism expressed by the above mentioned study can be challenged.

Second, the conclusion reached by the ANDI study that Brazilian journalists adopted ‘a common sense’ perspective to deal with disability issues can be more revealing than one might think. If we conceive of the notion of ‘social learning’ – following the theoretical framework of Honneth (2002) and Habermas (1987, p. 125) – as a generalization of values and accumulated knowledge that is pre-given to the individual subject (as a pre-interpreted domain of what is culturally taken for granted), then, the stock of knowledge about disability supplying the journalists’ interpretation reveals some important degrees of recognitional attitudes in the present moment. The media agents – despite their alleged short-sighted view, their misunderstandings or their negligence of supposedly important questions – expressed a view of people with impairment as individuals with needs, and as subjects who deserve to be treated with respect. Such a view, far from stemming from a ‘simplistic’ or a ‘naïve’ perspective, can be best assessed as the result of a historical complex learning process that understands disability as a ‘moral issue’ – that is, an issue, in Northway’s words, including ‘a set of principles which ensure that disabled people are seen as valued and needed’ (Northway, 1997, p. 164; see also Terzi, 2004, p. 156; Calder, 2011). What is appealing here is that such a ‘common sense’ attitude – a knowledge which has an unproblematic nature, in the sense of being commonly accepted and internalized, forms a background intersubjectively shared in society. The norms and principles considered justified, and now immersed in the complexity of stored up cultural content, have already become socially valid and thus implicit in the ways in which people respond to one another<sup>15</sup>.

Third, it may not be surprising that media coverage falls far behind the patterns of interpretation and valuation of disabled people movements and advocacy groups, if we assume, along with Honneth, that forms of recognition already achieved in a given society always ‘call for greater degrees of morally appropriate behavior, than is ever practised in that particular reality’ (Honneth, 2002, p. 517). The multiple claims that have been raised on behalf of particular needs, specific rights and possible contributions of people with impairment are far from consensual in Brazilian society. As already discussed, some demands for recognition need clarification, some present limits to the achievement of the group’s own aims of inclusion and some can be harmful to others. In this sense, we align ourselves to scholars who argue that demands for recognition call for open-ended debates in the public

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<sup>15</sup> In Honneth’s words, the ‘space of reasons’ is also a historically changing domain; the evaluative human qualities to which we can respond rationally in recognizing others form ethical certitudes whose character changes unnoticeably with the cultural transformations of our lifeworld (Honneth, 2002, p. 512).

sphere as well as in the formal instances of the political system (Cooke, 2009, p. 91; Deranty, 2004, p. 313; Forst, 2007). Individuals and groups seeking recognition shall attempt to convince others of the value of their conceptions, practices and beliefs through reciprocal justification.

The transformation of ‘historical reasons’ and ‘moral recognition responses’ as ‘ethical certitudes’ which underscores ‘the evaluative human qualities to which we can respond rationally in recognizing others’, as Honneth (2002, p. 512) says, seems to be best grasped in a long-term perspective. When disabled people, activist scholars and leaders of social movements invite non-disabled people to see impairment in a new way; when they challenge other people’s simplistic views of the experience of disability and try to open their eyes to the oppressive character of some social arrangements, these critical actors ask for revision of antecedent interpretative knowledge. Individuals and groups seeking recognition may express highly-demanding requests or may hold unfair demands; such claims may not be the right ones and frequently they do not go unchallenged. Yet, these critical actors play, in the spirit of Honneth, an important role in the process of contestation of actual social practices and institutionalized policies, while putting in motion a ‘permanent pressure’ to learn.

## **Conclusion**

In our study, we can observe cultural transformations of valuable human qualities of people with disabilities in the media arena across the four decades under investigation. While protected by rights and regarded as individuals with needs, people with disabilities have been expressing an ever greater range of differences in their identity features and in their ways of pursuing self-realization. Greater degrees of recognition of people with impairment in Brazilian society have not been conducive to the removal of tensions and conflicts from social life, as Düttmann and Markell feared. The increased variety of voices of disabled people (from their own perspective) in the public arena and their involvement in taking the initiative to control their lives (collectively and individually) have also expanded contestation of different forms of marginalization, discrimination and disrespect embedded in society. As we can clearly see in the news media, moral disagreement and conflict of interest come to the fore across the ever expanding domains of social life from the 1980’s onwards. Honneth’s work enables us to pay attention to the important transformative role played by groups seeking recognition in their effort to challenge unquestioned norms, assumptions, practices and social arrangements currently existing in a given society. Therefore, this theoretical

framework can sharpen our perception about the centrality of public contestation and the perpetuity of struggles as constitutive of social life. It makes us even more aware of the different types of injustice and claims for recognition that have actually been raised. It also prompts us to broaden our notion of what should count as collective learning processes on how recognition responses might be further improved.

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