

research article

Practices of recognition and misrecognition in encounters between social workers and parents struggling with poverty

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This study explores recognition and misrecognition practices in encounters between parents in poverty and social workers trying to help them. The goal of the analysis is to understand how such practices can lead the actors involved to feel either included and valued or misrecognized and excluded, and which factors influence these possibilities. The research was carried out by administering qualitative interviews to 40 parents struggling with poverty and 27 social workers in eight Italian regions. The analysis identified four forms of recognition and misrecognition: negative recognition, invisibility, conditional recognition and mutual recognition. The first three 'ethnocentric' forms exclude reciprocity by denying recognition or generating instrumental forms of recognition, negatively affecting the helping relationship. Practices of mutual recognition are instead made collectively in interactions in which professionals not only express care for the other but also assume and treat the person as an autonomous individual who can take up a critical stance towards recognition practices and norms in the helping relationship. Recognition practices also emerge as a powerful tool for social workers to fight the vicious circles of misrecognition of parents in poverty; however, these relations need to be nurtured and made possible, through meso- and macro-level interventions as well.

Keywords social work practices • recognition • power • diversity • parenting in poverty

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Introduction

The concept of recognition (Fraser and Honneth, 2003; Butler, 2004) has fostered theoretical analyses and debates in several disciplines, including social work (Garrett, 2010; Webb, 2010; Rossiter, 2014; Houston, 2016). It has also increasingly gained attention in the literature about poverty (Lister, 2001; Krumer-Nevo, 2020), understood as a form of recognition deprivation. Misrecognition and disrespect are

recurrent experiences of individuals and groups struggling with poverty, frequently labelled as an 'underclass' inhabiting a 'dependency culture' or as charity cases that need professional intervention to be re-educated. These discourses can also shape welfare policies and social work interventions, contributing, more or less voluntarily, to foster social exclusion (Morris et al, 2018).

While the literature reflecting on recognition and poverty is abundant, empirical studies in institutional settings are still limited and mainly focused on misrecognition and disrespect, with less attention to the processes fostering recognition in different spheres (Honneth, 1996) as a way to tackle the consequences of poverty. This article aims to fill in this gap by critically investigating recognition and misrecognition practices in welfare encounters, as well as their influence on the helping relationship between parents struggling with poverty and social workers trying to help them.

Background

The concept of recognition

The theory of recognition by Axel Honneth (1996; Fraser and Honneth, 2003) is useful to shed light on processes and practices that foster or hamper inclusive social relations at the micro and macro levels. According to Honneth, recognition specifically refers to the signs that individuals give of the value they place on others, and it is associated with the concept of reciprocity. From Honneth's perspective, the self is relational: individuals are viewed not as predefined subjects that enter relationships but as able to develop their identity, self-consciousness and autonomy within and thanks to intersubjective relations of mutual recognition.

Honneth links a general thesis on identity formation to his analysis of how concrete forms of recognition have varied throughout history. In modern Western societies, he discerns a process of differentiation of three spheres of recognition. In the sphere of love or close relationships of positive regard, individuals recognize each other as unique and worthy subjects, with concrete physical and emotional needs; thanks to this kind of reciprocal recognition, they develop self-confidence. In the legal sphere, individuals consider each other as human beings with rights equal to others, a necessary condition for the formation of self-respect. In the sphere of solidarity, people learn to understand themselves as subjects possessing capabilities and talents that are valuable for society, developing their self-esteem. In contrast, experiences of misrecognition – in the forms of maltreatment, disrespect and denigration – are a source of harm for people and may hamper the formation of fully realized subjectivities. Nevertheless, even if the lack of recognition may be detrimental to people's well-being, it can also lead to the development of resistance strategies in the forms of struggles for recognition (Honneth, 1996) at both individual and collective levels. Honneth highlights how experiences of misrecognition are associated with strong feelings of shame or anger; when these occur systematically, and if there is some kind of social movement for articulating them, resistance can emerge.

Honneth, following Hegel, understands relations of recognition as essentially conflictual and dynamic. Conflicts lead to the differentiation of spheres of recognition; moreover, they engender extensions and new interpretations of principles of recognition (Bertram and Celikates, 2015). For the German philosopher, misrecognition is the

root cause of social inequality (Fraser and Honneth, 2003), while recognition practices are the foundation of social justice and a precondition for redistribution.

Honneth's work has been criticized by several scholars, offering divergent and sometimes complementary perspectives. Drawing from theories of both class and status, Fraser argues that redistribution and recognition go hand in hand but are distinct dimensions of social justice as participatory parity (Fraser and Honneth, 2003). For the North American philosopher, misrecognition is more a status injury than harm to the individual psyche or group identity. Misrecognition prevents group members from participating fully as partners in society; it may be expressly codified in formal law, government policies, administrative rules or professional practices, as well as embedded and informally institutionalized in the associational patterns and sedimented social practices of civil society (Fraser, 2000). From Fraser's perspective, the remediation of individual suffering is not possible unless the structural variables causing it are addressed (Fraser and Honneth, 2003), enhancing the equality of status.

Other scholars have criticized Honneth, highlighting how recognition does not enable autonomy and freedom but rather increases conformism by normalizing and disciplining human beings (Jaeggi and Celikates, 2017). In this perspective, processes of misrecognition are seen as embedded in recognition practices, in which individuals are constrained by various cultural and social structures, for example, the family, the state and the market. Recognition is only possible in relation to the established norms of recognition that practically force individuals into the corresponding social roles (for example, the role of 'mother' or 'service user' and so on) or treat them as deviant, excluding them on such grounds. The realization of freedom through reciprocal recognition is seen as an ideology that contributes to obscuring the functioning of the dominant order of recognition. This negative interpretation of recognition has been criticized as a conceptualization that primarily focuses on structures, obscuring individual agency and the possibilities emerging from social practices that can foster non-reifying, non-instrumentalizing attitudes and social relations.

Theories about recognition have oriented a vast theoretical and empirical literature aimed at understanding which kinds of recognition people are struggling for and how potential parties recognize each other or are denied recognition as legitimate actors in claiming it. In the next section, we are going to discuss in particular the work of scholars that applied this lens in the field of social work.

Recognition in the social work field

Honneth has not specifically analysed the issue of recognition in professional helping relationships. Nevertheless, his theory has inspired theoretical reflections and empirical research, showing how practitioners and services are part of the processes that can convey either recognition or misrecognition.

In the social work field, mirroring the wider debate, different authors have assumed conflicting positions on the theory of recognition. Reflections focused on Honneth's earlier work stress the risk of the 'psychologization' of human problems and a reductionist focus on micro-level encounters (Garrett, 2010; Webb, 2010). For example, echoing Fraser's critiques, both Garrett and Webb highlight recognition theory's conceptual limitations in dealing with questions of the redistribution of wealth.

Other authors are more positive about the helpfulness of Honneth's theory for the social work profession and discipline. Through an empirical analysis, [Juul \(2009\)](#) aims to demonstrate how recognition can be used as a normative ideal to critically reflect on social work judgement. [Laitinen and Pirhonen \(2019\)](#) identify in the theory of recognition a powerful heuristic instrument to analyse what promotes interpersonal recognition in long-term residential care settings. Other authors stress the relevance of the theory not only to detect practices aimed at building empathic love and caring relationships but also to overcome narrow individual-oriented approaches by fostering the recognition of rights and countering the effect of oppressive social and organizational practices ([Houston and Montgomery, 2017](#)).

An empirical study by [Sebrechts et al \(2019\)](#) assumes a more critical perspective on Honneth's concept of recognition, highlighting ambiguities and contradictions that originate from its empirical use. Their findings from a study on services for the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities highlight the necessity to overcome a representation of 'pure' and 'perfect' forms of recognition that cannot actually be traced in concrete situations in everyday life, especially in contexts marked by social inequality. These scholars conclude that misrecognition is unfolded in recognition, meaning that an instance of recognition coincides with, and likely depends on, some form of misrecognition.

Theoretical reflection and a few empirical works focus explicitly on poverty and recognition in welfare settings. [Isola et al \(2019\)](#), in a study involving people living in poverty, apply Fraser's concept of recognition to analyse narrations related to experiences of misrecognition and recognition in their everyday lives, highlighting how the Finnish welfare state, which rests on standardized universalism and a social security system based on predefined risks, fails to grant recognition to poor people in an increasingly polarized society. [Timor-Shlevin \(2021: 1\)](#) – recalling Fraser's distinction between redistribution and recognition – highlights how the focus on 'recognition in social work practice hinders the conceptualization of providing material support as a valuable practice'. A complementary conclusion is instead reached by [Tonkens and Verplanke \(2013\)](#), who, in a study involving single mothers on welfare, aimed to demonstrate how without relational security conveyed by practices of recognition in the everyday interactions between mothers and social workers, the material security that the welfare state offers cannot be enjoyed.

[Gupta et al \(2018\)](#), adopting Lister's framework of 'the politics of recognition and respect' and drawing from findings of a study involving social workers, parents in poverty and academics, shed light on the importance of social work participatory practice at the micro and macro levels. These scholars also call for further studies on how poverty and parenting interrelate and on how macro-level structural inequalities influence the lived experiences of families and social workers, broadening the focus from a relational to a political level. This article adds to this strand of literature, exploring which forms of recognition and misrecognition are experienced and reproduced in encounters between parents in poverty and social workers and, more particularly, which factors can foster the possibility of building mutual recognition between the actors involved in the helping relationship.

Method

This study is part of wider research on parenting in conditions of disadvantage and the role of social work in tackling them. More specifically, our team focused on

parenting in poverty, carrying out a study oriented by the constructivist grounded theory (CGT) approach (Charmaz, 2014). Data were gathered through qualitative interviews administered to 40 parents struggling with poverty and 27 social workers.

Parents were engaged through the intermediation of professionals or volunteers in the public and the third sectors. The questions to parents focused on two main areas: (1) their parenting coping strategies to face economic deprivation; and (2) their experience with welfare offices aimed at helping them. Table 1 shows the characteristics of our participants.

Social workers were involved by their managers or some of the regional councils of social workers; they were all Italians working in anti-poverty services (8), child protection services (11) and generalist municipality services (8), the majority in the public sector (19). The interviews with social workers explored: (1) their representations of poverty and parenting in poverty; and (2) their discourses on the role of social work in supporting parents struggling with poverty.

The recursive stages of data collection, analysis and interpretation took place during the period between October 2020 and May 2021. From the CGT analysis, 'recognition' emerged as a core category in explaining the processes that hamper or foster the well-being of parents and children (Sanfelici, 2023). For the purpose of this study, we applied it as a core sensitizing concept within a secondary thematic analysis. The aim was to explore the fine-grained everyday experiences of interpersonal interactions

Table 1: Parents' characteristics (n = 40)

Gender	
Male	13
female	27
Parent type	
Non-single parent	27
Single parent	13
Number of children	
1-2	24
3	10
> 3	6
Where they live	
North of Italy	20
South of Italy	20
Citizenship	
Italian	26
Non-Italian	14
Occupation	
Unemployed	18
Seasonal/working poor	11
Irregular worker	7
On pension	2
Housewife	2

and practices of recognition and misrecognition, as well as structurally focused aspects that contextualize them within mid-level organizations and macro-level sociocultural systems. To carry out the analysis, we first proceeded with a line-by-line reading of each participant interview's text to detect reflections on or descriptions of episodes referred to as experiences of recognition and misrecognition of parents and social workers. Second, for each of these narrations, two researchers inductively identified the emerging themes (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003). Third, the researchers actively engaged in discussions to compare their findings and reconcile any differences in the labelling of the themes. Finally, the emerging themes were grouped under core themes that identified types of recognition, which were then further refined to achieve internal consistency and coherence within the analysis.

Findings: practices of recognition and misrecognition in social service encounters

The analysis identified four core themes related to different experiences of recognition and misrecognition in the encounters between parents and social workers, as synthesized in [Table 2](#) and described in the following paragraphs.

Theme 1: Negative recognition

Some parents talked about encounters in social services in which they felt negatively recognized; in some circumstances, they felt treated as untrustworthy, incapable as persons or as parents, suspected, or delegitimized. This happened, for example, when some professionals questioned them about their prolonged condition of precarity as if they were not committed enough to finding autonomous solutions. Other interviewees perceived that having asked for material aid from social services led them to be investigated as if they had something wrong or fewer capacities instead of obtaining help. An example was provided by Blessing, an immigrant mother of three children from Nigeria, who asked for help before being evicted:

The social worker told me: 'Go and look for apartments to rent!' And I answered: 'Do you think I don't want to rent a house? Here, I don't find it because of my condition and people do not easily rent homes to foreigners!' I did not find any support ... and then they [social services] said 'Before helping we need to go to the school of your children.' And then they came to my house to see ... they checked with children's teachers if everything was okay or.... 'Ok, go, I have nothing to hide!'

We did not find in the social workers' narrations episodes in which they refer to intentional negative discrimination. Nevertheless, the analysis identified negative preconceptions in some interviews, sometimes built in relation to widespread theories or forms of generalization from their professional experience or common sense, that risked involuntarily reproducing labelling and othering processes. Some social workers, for example, explained how their professional experience led them to identify subgroups of people that, due to a subculture of poverty or their cultural background, have not learnt good parenting models, neglecting some fundamental children's needs:

Table 2: Overview of themes and related subthemes

Themes	Subthemes (parents' discourses)	Subthemes (social workers' discourses)	Consequences for the helping relationship
1. Negative recognition			
1.1 Feeling negatively recognized	Judged/investigated as untrustworthy/incapable/unaware	Kept at a distance: untrusted/represented as 'enemies'	Reciprocal mistrust and self-defence; no chances for exchange
1.2 To negatively recognize	Negative representations (social workers as bureaucrats, controllers)	Negative representations (parents belong to an (inadequate) subculture of poverty or a different (inadequate) cultural background)	
2. Invisibilization			
2.1 Feeling unseen	Perceived relational distance (inattention, low interest/low commitment/service in defence)		Bureaucratic relationship; relational neglect
	Unseen as a person with unique needs		
2.2 To invisibilize		Relational work hampered by organizational/policy rules, priorities	
3. Conditional recognition			
3.1 To conditionally recognize	The 'good' social worker	The 'collaborative' parent	Risk of an expert trap; risk of an instrumental relationship; possible cultural clashes
3.2. Feeling considered/appreciated	Valued for meeting expectations	Valued for meeting expectations	
3.3 Feeling misrecognized	Unseen/judged because of unmet expectations	Unseen/judged because of unmet expectations	
4. Reciprocal recognition			
	Feeding trust and lowering distance through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • seeing 'the person' before social expectation • commitment to understanding each other's perspectives • recognition of unmet needs/rights • common sense-making/learning 	Feeding trust and lowering distance through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • seeing 'the person' before social expectation • commitment to understanding each other's perspectives • recognition of unmet needs/rights • common sense-making/learning 	Mutual exchange and learning

You have to make them understand that parenting is characterized by a series of very complex functions, which include not only the ability to satisfy material needs but also the educational needs, and involves a series of dimensions that go beyond ensuring food.... For them [a subgroup of the poor], the normality is the one they know. They are not aware of their negligence, and there is no desire for change because according to them, we are the ones who have gone further and they are the ones who live a situation of normality.... If they do not become aware of the problem, they have the presumption of being right; they see the service as an enemy ... then, any kind of intervention is unsuccessful because they think that we are mad at them. (Social worker)

These professionals stressed the importance of their task to 'raise the awareness' of parents about their flaws, as well as through the help of experts from the education or the psychology fields. This approach seemed to be built on the opposition between 'them' (parents in poverty) and 'us' (the expert), leading to cultural clashes related to different worldviews or negative representations, obscuring the impact of a wider oppressive context.

From the parents' interviews emerged several negative prejudices about social workers as well, mainly in relation to widespread representations, which influenced their perceptions before allowing the possibility of concrete interactions. Some parents explained that they see these professionals as distant bureaucrats and treat them as such; when forced to ask for help because of economic precariousness, their assumption was to receive material aid, excluding a priori processes of common sense-making. Negative socially constructed representations of both parents and professionals hamper the possibility of building collaborative relationships, leading to reciprocal mistrust and self-defence; parents try to stay as far as possible from social services, while social workers admit that they have to exercise control for the children's sake, without the possibility to co-construct opportunities for change.

Theme 2: Invisibilization

Parents described several episodes in which they felt 'unseen' due to organizational and professional practices that led to forms of social invisibilization (Honneth, 2001). This happened, for example, when workers were perceived as executing their tasks, asking for evidence and information, while treating them more as cases to process than persons, sometimes just involuntarily showing inattention and interest in what they were sharing. Differently from other professions, in care relationships recognition norms require engaging with another individual in a way that recognizes him/her as a unique person. When social workers positioned themselves mainly as gatekeepers of aid or managers of service provision, without a personal engagement, they were felt by parents as more distant, as people who 'are not there' for them when they are in need or are not able to see them as unique individuals:

They activate aids that are available for everyone, for example, the bonus to buy children's books, ok, but maybe one person is experiencing more difficulties than another, and if a social worker is not there to listen to those people who

have a more immediate need, if we receive aids that everybody else receives ... it seems to me that the social worker's role is a little bit useless. (Mother)

Some parents needed to struggle to obtain help and 'be seen'. In some cases, they did not understand the reason for this treatment; in others, they attributed it to professionals' different social positioning, which does not allow them to deeply understand their suffering, or to agency rules or the scarcity of resources available to provide help:

At the first attempt, they answer, 'No, because there are families worse than you, because you can save yourself with what you have'; but I have nothing, and I have to insist, to call, to go in person; you call, call, call, and finally they help you, but you have to struggle. (Mother)

Some social workers' reflections help to understand such processes. Interviewees described organizational and professional practices that expose them to the risk of neglecting parents' needs. Unsustainable workloads, the lack of time to work with the community, managers' concern being more focused on bureaucratic tasks and service provision, and top-down organizations that do not allow creativity and informal practices limit their possibility to invest time in relational work, which is often taken for granted, or invisibilized:

Differently from the other municipality where I worked, here ... the job is more a technical one. Sometimes, I have the sensation to be considered as an administrative worker, limiting my assessment to eligibility criteria to access resources. (Social worker)

The consequence of such practices was the perception of both actors of being involved in a relationship dominated by standardized rules and bureaucratic priorities, which risks invisibilizing both the persons and the relationship between them.

Theme 3: Conditional recognition

In some interactions, the collaboration between parents and social workers seemed to be based on forms of conditional recognition: recognition was 'given' if the other conformed to preconceived expectations. Unlike negative recognition, conditional recognition provides an affirmation of the value of the individuals in relation to socially valued traits or personal assumptions (Giles, 2018). For example, 'collaborative' parents felt recognized in relation to their capacity to comply with socially determined roles and rules, to the social workers' expectations, or to their way of directing the helping relationship:

[The social workers told me] 'You have no issues with drugs, you are not a woman on the street, so you do not have to worry. Moreover, you came to us; we did not have to come to you. And just for this, you are a woman we appreciate.' [And I answered] 'Yes, I am completely alone, I need help.' And they told me I am a special woman since I am able to ask ... they tell me: 'Do this, and do this.' I take the good and the bad from them, but I feel safe. (Mother)

The so-called ‘expert trap’ is a possible factor leading to forms of conditional recognition when professionals assume that parents trust their knowledge and experience to identify what is best for them and their children. Similarly, the professionals recognized as the ‘good social worker’ are those meeting parents’ expectations. For some of the interviewed parents, this means a professional who is always there when needed, while others refer to a professional executing tasks to provide material help, without asking questions about their lives.

The relationship seemed to work when both the parties involved obtained what they were expecting: parents accepted the plan defined by the professionals and got the requested subsidies, and the social workers allowed access to material aids while obtaining information needed for planning the ‘right’ intervention. However, there seemed to be no interaction between categories and worldviews.

In other cases, conditional recognition led both actors to the perception of not being recognized for their actual qualities and contributions. For some parents, the role of social workers as experts in what needs to be done was perceived as disempowering, with the consequence of feeling bewildered and not understanding the assessment process. An immigrant mother from Albania, maltreated by her husband, felt that she was recognized as ‘good’ only if she complied with the plan established by the ‘experts’, not for her commitment as a mother:

You fled with your three children from a violent father ... you did not do anything wrong, but you need to be followed by them [social services] because they say ... ‘We see that you are committed, that you followed the path, but since you are alone with three children and you are in need...’ They said this ... but I am a good mother, why do I need to follow up with them? I do not understand. (Mother)

The risk of misrecognition was also high when recognition was ‘given’ in relation to socially valued traits that seem to trap people in roles that do not fit them but are seen as ‘appropriate’ in relation to their social positioning. For example, a professional seemed to assume that ‘good behaviour’ for people in poverty is to adapt to any kind of work and aid, giving up desires that only middle-class people can afford:

You ask for money at this charity for your children’s books, and then you go to the bar, playing cards, or you are standing in line next to me to get a *piadina* [an Italian sandwich] – which has its price – for more than once, in the city centre, in the strolling area with a beer in your hand ... so, for me, those are not your real needs. Save your money and pay what you can afford. (Social worker)

Social workers also referred to forms of conditional recognition in their experience with parents when they felt treated ‘as a bank machine’ more than helping professionals. Parents’ strategies to obtain the help they needed was to comply in order to receive what they asked for, without allowing a relationship based on exchange and trust; this could have happened in relation to representations of professionals as service providers or to negative assumptions about ‘asking’. This is confirmed by some parents: ‘I went to see them [social

services] because of my economical issues; then, I do what they require, but I do not want any involvement with them' (mother).

In all these scenarios, when role expectations were not met, the actors interacting in the relationship used different strategies to handle the feeling of being misrecognized in relation to different positions of power. Some parents submitted to professionals' decisions, fearful of negative consequences for their children; others reacted by trying to reaffirm their perspective. When possible, in relation to the level of precarity, some parents interrupted contact with the agency. In relationships that were perceived as instrumental, social workers generally felt frustrated, worried about the consequences of a rapport not able to produce change. Some tried to reaffirm their power by imposing conditions; others instrumentally accepted the parents' requests to 'at least' gain the possibility of ensuring opportunities 'for the children'. Some practitioners tried to allow more time, hoping to be able to create the possibility for trust, while others decided to close the case.

Theme 4: Reciprocal recognition

Some of the parents and social workers narrated how they built reciprocal trust through a process in which they learnt to recognize each other's values, highlighting the daily work needed to feed this kind of relationship, as well as the constant challenges to maintain it. The condition to build trust is having a close relationship based on authenticity and positive regard, with a reciprocal commitment to understanding each other's perspectives. Recognition is not something given but a practice built in everyday encounters provided that, before any role expectations, the actors involved take each other first of all as persons in concrete interactions. A mother explained how her negative preconceptions about child protection workers changed during the helping process after having seen how they were highly engaged, committed, helpful and 'like a family' member. She did not feel treated as 'a case', and she reciprocated the consideration for them as persons she trusted:

I feel good with them [the social workers], and I do not treat them as social workers but as sisters, meaning that I do not see them as people in a path that I must do, but like sisters ... and I hope they can remain until my children are 18 because they are really helpful. I did not expect a kind of help like this. (Mother)

The helping relationship can be meaningful and fulfilling in itself; for some parents, the worker was the first person to see them as trapped by intersecting forms of recognition denial. Professionals who allowed 'talking as normal' and were 'there' to understand their concerns, without invading their space, were able to build trust even in the most difficult conditions, in which the experience of several forms of injustice was leading parents to lose trust in everybody.

Social workers made a difference in parents' lives, including by conveying recognition through the activation of resources that allowed them to regain control over their lives. Enabling the parents' access to aids necessary for their well-being and

letting them know which were their rights was a source of empowerment, as this social worker tried to explain:

I see that talking about what they [parents] are entitled to changes also their expression and posture.... I talk about their rights that, sometimes, they do not even know they have.... 'Yes, you are entitled by the law because you are recognized as a person with rights.' And, little by little, even shame can go away.

A social worker highlighted the importance of recognizing the parents as capable, independently from established and trapping social roles, and how this is the trigger to empowering their self-efficacy. For example, she described the situation of a father that used to behave like a traditional male breadwinner, avoiding domestic work, until his wife suddenly died, and he felt lost. What worked was creating a space for him in which he realized that he was capable of taking care of his children and finding solutions. This interviewee's words help to explain how a relationship of reciprocal trust between her and this father grew:

It is a work that can take more or less time. At the beginning, the father was not very proactive, in a position, like, 'Okay, let's see, first, what you have to propose to me.' And in my opinion, here, the growth of the relationship plays a role in seeing the strengths and resources, what we can do together, that you do not have to wait and see just what the service can give you, but ... he saw that I saw him, I recognized him, and, gradually, he started recognizing me and himself as a caregiver. (Social worker)

Mutual recognition seemed to create a virtuous circle, contrasting with the consequences of the vicious circle of misrecognition: social workers felt recognized as professionals and persons of value, and appreciation was a reciprocal source of empowerment:

I was happily surprised when the father came to thank us, even if we were not able to find a stable job for him, he decided to volunteer here [at the agency], and he said, 'You helped me and it's time for me to help you', and this was such a good thing for me. (Social worker)

When acts of mutual recognition were created, parents and social workers seemed to be able to share a project based on processes of common sense-making. The partners reciprocally shared thoughts and concerns in a relationship in which everyone was recognized as autonomous and competent.

Once built, trust and mutual recognition need constant maintenance. Cognitive and emotional perspective taking is challenging and time-consuming, exposes people to reciprocal vulnerability and sometimes implies conflicts. Recognition is built based on practices in which the spirit of both partners is about learning without exploiting, providing care without substituting and dominating, and giving up on egocentric interests. However, this spirit is constantly undermined in conditions of social injustice, when socially constructed forms of vulnerability lead to constant challenges and struggles, endangering the possibility of trusting

and counting on others, and sometimes even compromising the strength required to fight for recognition.

The words of a mother – who had suffered in the past from poverty and labour exploitation in the agricultural field and at the time of the interview was working as a social operator in the same cooperative that had helped her – clearly suggest how recognition requires presence and lowering distances as the basis for encounters between different perspectives:

Going right there [in the degraded countryside where exploited people live], taking half an hour for a coffee with these moms, in their context, then, little by little, you can build trust and you can understand things that otherwise you cannot recognize. It does so much ... if you do not know, you cannot understand. (Mother and social operator)

In the interviews, we found several examples in which social workers were allies in struggles for recognition at an individual level, advocating to defend parents as bearers of rights. From the parents' voices, we identified the need to also move towards a collective level, but our data did not provide any concrete examples of shared struggles or projects to foster collective actions to claim recognition.

Discussion: diversity and power in misrecognition and recognition practices

The goal of our analysis was to understand how practices that are shaped in everyday encounters between social workers and parents struggling with poverty can lead the actors involved to feel either included and valued or misrecognized and excluded. Categorization processes seem to be one of the main issues at stake in practices of recognition and misrecognition. They satisfy a human need for cognitive parsimony, and they are at the heart of coordinated joint actions and sense-making. Social categories are constructed in and through interactions; as such, they are public cultural resources, used to interpret both the material and social reality, which often remain unnoticed and taken for granted. Categories influence social workers' and parents' expectations in relation to social roles, for example, determining how a professional, a service user, a father, a mother or a person in poverty should behave. Both actors, like all of us, reach an interpretation of things and situations from within their own particular horizons and partial outlooks. In this sense, all interpretation is prejudiced, in that it is always oriented to one's own present concerns (Gadamer, 1989). However, our analysis shows how there can be different ways of using these categories in welfare encounters that lead to different outcomes in the helping relationship, in which questions of power and diversity are involved. The acknowledgement or denial of differences and the conception of each actor's distinct perspectives as static or flexible influence the types of recognition practices we found through our analysis.

When the interaction is shaped by negative forms of recognition, the other's value and contributions are denied, and his/her experiences, words and actions are delegitimized. In these encounters, a negative preconception, not the other individual, is being seen (Giles, 2018), and every actor is on the defence. Parents identified as belonging to a 'subculture' of poverty can easily be negatively stereotyped and assessed

as inadequate; similarly, parents may negatively identify social workers as bureaucrats who are there to punish them. Furthermore, invisibilization practices lead to a neglect of the other's social presence in relation to socially constructed categories or inattentive attitudes linked to professionals or organizational practices, which build a kind of 'relational neglect'. Professionals' inattention may be due to a lack of time, emotional overload or standardized practices that often involuntarily do not consider the possibility of others' contribution.

We also identified other forms of distorted recognition (Giles, 2018), labelled as 'conditional recognition', when individuals recognize others by engaging with them and applying their culture's seemingly positive recognition norms. Recognition is given but focuses on alleged positives while, however, excluding other positives (Giles, 2018). These forms of conditional recognition can also give individuals a sense of meaning and value, but they are not based on reciprocity; what is seen are traits and not the person and their uniqueness. Recognition norms associated with traits can be normalizing and become oppressive when they are suited for certain social groups, excluding others; some examples are standards for 'good parenting' that are set on middle-class values and possibilities being applied without considering class differences, or assumptions about the 'right' behaviours of a 'father' or of a 'client in poverty'. Furthermore, an expert-centred professional practice can lead to a selective recognition of those who 'comply', uncovering unequal relationships between parents and professionals. What is requested is a priori trust, not one built through a process of common sense-making.

Forms of negative recognition, invisibilization or conditional recognition seem to be associated with ways of helping, guided by what Bennet (1986) named as an ethnocentric perspective: people or organizations assume their own worldviews to be the right one, denigrating or invisibilizing differences. All these forms preclude the possibility of an encounter based on reciprocity: prejudices, preconceptions and professional or organizational interests seem to hamper the possibility for practices of mutual recognition, generating instrumental forms of recognition influenced by 'power' or egocentric interests (Giles, 2018).

Some literature depicts social workers as essentially representatives of the dominant system and values, aiming at normalizing and, if needed, disciplining service users (Juul, 2009) or simply reproducing the dominant order, without exercising awareness. Our analysis shows how distorted forms of recognition cannot be reduced only to ideological machinations of an external power structure, but are often unintentional behaviours and ways of thinking of the 'ordinary' agent (Martineau, 2012). The risk of simplification and generalizations, constantly present in human judgement, and a selective focus on tasks that may lead to the neglect of others, especially when working in stressful organizational conditions, are 'ordinary' challenges that call for the introduction of critical reflection as a daily task in welfare offices.

If, on the one hand, the risk of unintentional practices of misrecognition is always present in social work encounters, on the other hand, misrecognition also seems to develop in forms of social oppression (Johnson, 2000) when it is coupled with unequal power structures. This happens, both in welfare organizations and in wider social contexts, when some sets of recognition norms are established as the standard of 'normality' by some groups able 'to project their experience as representative of everyone in society' (McConkey, 2004: 202). In our study, for example, it is evident how parents in poverty find themselves in the position of suffering both contributive and epistemic injustices

(Fricker, 2007), being rendered invisible or stereotyped in relation to dominant meanings that establish what is valued in societies, as well as in welfare encounters.

Nevertheless, the wider sociocultural processes in which people are immersed do not erase their agency, and individual practices can contribute to both reproduce or transform them. Our findings highlight several examples of mutual recognition practices that emerged as a way for social workers to counteract the effect of vicious circles of misrecognition of parents in poverty. In relations of reciprocal recognition, people recognize each other as bearers of rights and capable of contribution due to their qualities but are also actively involved in tailoring their response to the individual in front of them, considered as unique, with their individuality and differences. Mutual recognition emerges as a practice, something made collectively in interactions in welfare encounters. As such, it is always precarious and constantly under construction. Each actor is moved to recognition at least partly by norms or principles of recognition that are socially constructed and acknowledged as valid; the actual possibility of inclusion to avoid forcing individuals into preconceived social norms, is built at three intersecting levels. First, recognition practices start from the micro level; 'recognizing without condition' means reciprocally adapting one's own perspective to enable that of the other to learn from the encounter between views while amplifying one's own categories, therefore accepting a degree of uncertainty and vulnerability. This requires the capacity to put into question dominant meanings attached to categories, establish a dialogic and democratic relationship, and recognize clients as competent, as peers in the process of making sense of the situation, within a participatory practice (Gupta et al, 2018). Not only do the professionals express the authenticity of and care for the other but also assume and treat the person as an autonomous individual who can take up a critical stance towards recognition practices and norms in the helping relationship. Second, at the organizational level, welfare agencies need to facilitate a critical culture and institutionalized processes of confrontation and critical thinking (Bertram and Celikates, 2015) that are authentically open to the possibility of questioning which practices are inclusive or not, according to different perspectives. This means putting into question standardized processes embedded in policies and organizational settings (Isola et al, 2019) involving both professionals and citizens in the design of social services. Third, the resources to restore conditions of dignity and foster the recognition of rights must be in place, requiring adequate social policies that ensure redistribution as a condition for fostering social justice (Fraser and Honneth, 2003; IASSW, 2018).

Concluding remarks

The purpose of our analysis was not to find the 'good' or the 'dark' side in social service organizations and actors involved but to deepen our understanding of the conditions in which underlying forms of misrecognition are reproduced in each of the Honneth's three spheres and to shed light on the factors that in ordinary interactions contribute to foster recognition. The quality of interpersonal relations at the micro level matters, but it is highly influenced by categorization processes and dominant discourses at the meso and macro levels, where structural and cultural factors may generate and feed the conditions of social injustice (IASSW, 2018).

Our findings have made more evident how to foster reciprocal recognition as the basis for actual inclusion, norms of recognition cannot be set in advance but are themselves the subject of democratic dialogues at multiple levels that allow different voices and sometimes competing interpretations (Martineau, 2012), with no 'end state' resolutions (Tully, 2000), nor a set of pre-defined recommendations for professionals. Practices of reciprocal recognition in the helping relationship are co-constructed in everyday encounters, and the conditions for them to actually unfold need to be not only constantly nurtured through relationships based on trust but also enabled by organizational and contextual factors. Developing the capacity for critical reflection on professional practices is crucial, though not enough. Meso-level interventions to foster anti-oppressive organizational practices and policies are necessary tasks in social work agencies. Allowing and enabling the participation of parents in poverty in the design of interventions, services and policies is a way to build organizations open to learning and transforming themselves, not just reacting to emerging issues or contestations. Macro-practice interventions are needed to unveil and tackle power structures that reproduce individualistic explanations of poverty and other systemic failures, which need to be addressed with politics at the local, national and global scales. Critical reflection is needed to assess how social policies may contribute either to the recognition of citizens as full human beings worthy of respect or to reinforcing misrecognition. Further research may analyse possibilities at the policy level that may foster recognition practices in welfare settings, looking at power relations at different levels.

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