

HIGHER EDUCATION AND RECOGNITION AS AN INDIVIDUAL VALUE: THEORETICAL CHALLENGES AND EMPIRICAL MANIFESTATIONS

Asen V. Dimitrov
Dr. Petya Ilieva-Trichkova, Assoc. Prof.
*Institute of Philosophy and Sociology
Bulgarian Academy of Sciences*

Abstract. The aim of this article is twofold: 1) to outline some theoretical considerations based on Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, which are helpful for understanding the relationship between higher education and recognition as an individual need and value, and 2) to demonstrate some empirical manifestations of this relationship linked to its interaction with key socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. Using data from the 2018 European Social Survey for 29 European countries and applying multilevel linear modelling, the study finds evidence for a positive association between having a higher education degree and the value individuals attribute to receiving recognition. The results also reveal that age, gender, and employment status moderate this association. More specifically, the strength of this positive association decreases by age, whereas the value of receiving recognition is greater among women with a higher education qualification and those graduates who are in paid work.

Keywords: higher education; recognition; value; achievement; inequality

Introduction

Higher education has frequently been conceived by states and individuals alike as a driver of economic change and social mobility (Troschitz 2017). Research into the benefits of higher education, however, demonstrates that looking at higher education only through the lens of the market might conceal the entire expanse of public and private goods developed and distributed by higher education and its institutions (Marginson 2014; Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova 2016; 2021). The question to what extent higher education institutions (HEIs) occupied by issues of funding, admission numbers, status, and rankings maintain and work to develop underlying non-instrumental benefits stands up for scrutiny. Nevertheless, through

the functioning of HEIs, higher education's contribution to the shaping and accomplishment of reasonable or legitimate individual human needs and aspirations – as problematic as the qualifier is – could well be as important as its role in knowledge generation and economic progress.

For example, previous research shows the importance of higher education and HEIs as spaces of individual identity exploration, negotiation, as well as framing (Fleming 2016; Brooks & O'Shea 2021). Intersubjective recognition, in particular, appears as a “key concept central in students' accounts of their motivation for applying to college and their determination ‘to stay the course’” (Fleming 2016, p. 18). Yet, recognition is hardly ever full or equally distributed. Previous qualitative research has demonstrated that nationality, ethnicity, place of residence, parents' education, and age or associated experiences to these factors could be linked to varying degrees of recognition, or misrecognition, frequently established in instances of displacement or predetermined difference (Fleming & Finnegan 2014; Ribeiro 2014; Webb, Dunwoodie & Wilkinson 2019). Unlike previous research, which addresses examples and consequences of (mis)recognition, this article focuses on the degree to which individuals value receiving recognition.

The subject of the article is namely the presumed association between higher education and this basic non-material human need – recognition. More concretely, the article aims to: 1) outline some theoretical considerations based on Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, which are helpful for understanding the relationship between higher education and attaching importance to recognition as an individual need and value, and 2) provide some empirical manifestations of this association when it comes to its interaction with key socioeconomic and demographic characteristics such as gender, age, place of living, and social origin.

The idea of recognition as an individual value and its link to higher education

Honneth (1995) argues that studying individual and group struggles for recognition is indispensable for understanding how society is structured and functions. He is concerned with the conditions for self-realisation of morally autonomous human beings, where autonomy is defined as “a certain type of individual relation-to-self that allows us to be confident of our needs and beliefs, and to value our own capacities” (Honneth 2014b, p. 41). Yet, autonomy is only built and maintained in an intersubjective, communicative fashion: individuals mutually or reciprocally recognise each other with their particular traits, desires, or abilities (Honneth 1992; 1995; 2014b). Recognition *of* and *in* the other is the basis of both self-actualisation and solidarity with the other. Following Hegel, Honneth argues that such relations of recognition, when placed within social institutions, translate into conditions for a shared kind of social freedom (Honneth 2014a) which is in turn instrumental for maintaining one's autonomous preferences or choices.

This complex theoretical construction is expressed through patterns of relations embedded in three key social structures – family, law, and work. Each one of these social institutions is characterised by separate forms of relations of recognition: love, respect, and solidarity (Honneth 1995). Such patterns are distinct and at the same time interlinked and interwoven in the individuals' living experience. Love as romantic love may be a subject of a type of familial arrangement and yet, love interpreted as close, empathic collegial or friendly relations may be located in the sphere of work or education. Respect stands for a kind of recognition which grants everyone equality before the law or a given shared formal or informal regulatory framework. Solidarity translates into social esteem of life projects or accomplishments, or "merit" (Fraser & Honneth 2003, p. 175), and requires a shared "orientation to those values and goals that indicate to each other the significance or contribution of their qualities for the life of the other" (Honneth 1995, p. 121). In addition, these three types of recognition refer to specific relations-to-self: self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem (Honneth 1995), which are impacted by the overall communicative framework of the intersubjective relations of recognition or their absence or failure.

Functioning continuous relations of recognition are important because receiving recognition translates into improved conditions for social participation. This happens as recognition nurtures the individual's relations-to-self and capacity to act autonomously, as well as supports productive social relations in benefit of individuals and their communities (Honneth 2014b). Regardless whether we look at the private sphere, the law, workspace, market, or state, human relations are regulated by "non-contractual but nevertheless binding rules [...] of mutual respect and esteem" (Honneth 2014a, p. 182). The mutual affirmation of the positive worth of one's individuality, as well as own interests, abilities, and achievements or merit is what allows individuals to trust, respect, and esteem themselves and their aspirations. On the other hand, misrecognition, or the failure of relations of recognition, is in general treated as "social injury" (Fraser & Honneth 2003, p. 114). Forms of misrecognition are various expressions of disrespect, denigration, disregard or exclusion which could impinge on one's autonomy, positive relations-to-self, or even life chances (Honneth 1992; 1995). At first look, diminishing or ignoring someone's accomplishments may seem a trivial social experience. Yet, as much as it is difficult to evaluate the extent of damage, instances of misrecognition impact negatively the individual's self-conception, capacities, and future choices, as well as hurt the social links between individuals and within communities (Honneth 1992; 2014a; 2014b).

In practice, however, individuals may not fully comprehend the impact of (mis) recognition. The value of recognition to concrete individuals may as well be unclear or beyond one's ethical horizon. As much as recognition is identified as a basic human need (Taylor 1994), individuals do not equally feel this need or grasp the

forms or effects of relations of (mis)recognition. The scope of practical concern of individuals is determined by the reach of their ethical horizon (Honneth et al. 2016). In other words, both expectations and demands for recognition are dependent on individuals' understanding of what constitutes ethical relations in a society, as well as on the value individuals attach to particular relations.

If higher education is treated as a vehicle of expanding one's worldviews, it may be hypothetically presumed that higher education leads to higher awareness *of* and expectations *for* recognition. Such a scenario does not exclude the possibility that individuals enter HEIs with increased expectations for recognition, which are then reinforced by the experience in higher education. For the purposes of this article, higher education is understood as a complex set of processes and practices within which relations of recognition (Honneth 1992; 1995; 2014a; 2014b) take place. Relations of recognition in higher education are particularly visible when higher education is conceived through terms such as collegiality, friendships, respect, and social esteem of aspirations and achievements. Higher education in its entirety could therefore be considered a "sphere of recognition" (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova 2021, p. 146) whose functioning impacts the individuals' understanding of the significance and value of relations of recognition, among other effects. In the next part of the article, we will focus on just one aspect of the complex relationship between recognition and higher education, as outlined in the above theoretical discussion. We will analyse – based on empirical data – whether people having a higher education degree but varying by social origin, gender, age, place of living, and employment status value receiving recognition more than people with lower levels of education. More concretely, we will try to answer the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: *Is there an association between main individual characteristics – especially having a higher education degree – and the value individuals attribute to receiving recognition?*

RQ2: *Do individual characteristics such as one's social origin, gender, age, place of living, and employment status moderate the association between having a higher education degree and the value individuals attribute to receiving recognition?*

Methodology

Data

We used data taken from the European Social Survey (ESS Round 9: European Social Survey Round 9 Data 2018) as the most recent data available at the time of the study. The analysis includes data for all 29 countries which the scientific data file contains: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland,

Portugal, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland. We limited the data to people aged 25 to 65. The lower age limit was defined as to give opportunity to people to have attained a higher education degree. The higher age bound was chosen to account for what is usually considered to be the working population. We have also done list-wise deletion of the cases with missing values for one or more of the individual variables. This resulted in an analytical sample of 27,646 cases.

Variables

To measure recognition, we used proxy information received as answers to three European Social Survey (ESS) 2018 questions asking “*How much each person is or is not like you*”: 1) “*It’s important to her/him to show her/his abilities. He wants people to admire what s/he does*” where, as per the study’s design, admire is defined as related with the actions, not with individual personality; 2) “*Being very successful is important to her/him. He hopes people will recognise her/his achievements*”, and 3) “*It is important to him to get respect from others. S/he wants people to do what s/he says*”, where “get” refers to get/have this respect, not deserve respect. The answer’s scale ranged from “very much like me” (1) to “not like me” (6). For the needs of the analysis the scale was reversed for all three items so that the higher the value of the answer, the higher the individuals’ attributed value to receiving recognition. In order to facilitate interpretation, we constructed an index comprising of these three variables. Its internal consistency, measured with Cronbach Alpha, is 0.704. The three items were standardised (converted into z-values). The standardised values were then transformed into scores on a scale ranging from 0 to 100. The higher the value of the index, the higher the attributed value to recognition. This composite is used as a *dependent* variable in the analysis.

Our main independent variable is “having a higher education degree” (1 for yes [International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) 2011 5-8] and 0 for no [ISCED 2011 0–4]).

As independent variables at the individual level we have also included: social origin, which we measure separately with father’s and mother’s education (1 for having a higher education degree and 0 for not having one); gender (1 = female; 0 = male); age (continuous); being in paid work in the last seven days (1 for yes and 0 for no); place of living measured with living in a village (1 for yes; 0 for no), and belonging to a minority ethnic group (1 for yes; 0 for no).

Method

In order to address our two research questions, we employed multilevel linear regression modelling. This technique was chosen because it is appropriate for handling nested data (see Rabe-Hesketh & Skrondal 2012). It allowed us to explore the association between higher education and valuing recognition as well as to see if some of the individual characteristics moderate the association between having a higher education degree and the value individuals attribute to receiving recog-

dition. This technique is usually worth applying when the intra-class correlation (ICC) is above 0.05, which is rule of thumb for Hox (1998). The ICC in the null regression model is 0.109. This shows that 10.9% of the variation in attributed value to receiving recognition is due to differences between the countries where adults live. Although we are aware of the presence of country differences, in this article we focus on the generalised individual differences and leave the analysis of country differences for further research.

More specifically, we estimated eight models. In Model 1 we tested the association between having a higher education degree and the value individuals attribute to receiving recognition. In Model 2 we tested if this association remained significant when the outlined individual characteristics were included, and in the rest of the models (3a – 3f) we tested if there were statistically significant interaction terms between having a higher education degree and the outlined individual characteristics regarding the value individuals attribute to receiving recognition.

As a robustness check we ran the models with ordinary linear regression in which we controlled for the countries, and the received estimates were largely consistent.

Results

Model 1 in Table 1 indicates that having a higher education degree is positively associated with the value individuals attribute to receiving recognition. It means that people who have completed higher education value receiving recognition to a greater extent than those who have lower levels of education. The strength of this association slightly decreases when we add the individual characteristics, but remains significantly positive (Model 2). Having a father with a higher education degree and being in paid work are also positively associated with valuing recognition, given the other covariates. At the same time, being a female and living in a village are associated with lower levels of valuing recognition. The estimates also show that the higher the age of a person, the lower the attributed value to receiving recognition. These results provide evidence to address *RQ1*.

The estimates in models 3a-3f show that only three of the tested individual characteristics – female gender, being in paid work, and age – moderate the association between having a higher education degree and the value individuals attribute to receiving recognition. These findings address *RQ2*. More specifically, the interaction terms between having a higher education degree and being a female and between having a higher education degree and being in paid work are positive, whereas the interaction term between having a higher education degree and age is negative. Furthermore, to facilitate the interpretation of the interaction effects, we plotted the significant ones using average marginal effects (see Figures 1 – 3). Model 3b reveals that when an interaction term between female gender and having a higher education degree is added, although having a higher education degree is associated with greater attributed value to receiving recognition, this value is even greater

among women with a higher education qualification. When an interaction term between having a higher education degree and being in paid work is added (model 3d), having a higher education degree loses its direct effect, but the interaction term with being in paid work gains significance, meaning that being in paid work is significantly related to greater attributed value to receiving recognition among higher education graduates. In the case of Model 3f, we observe that having a higher education degree is positively associated with valuing recognition, but the strength of this association decreases by age.

Table 1. Multilevel linear models showing associations between main individual characteristics and the value individuals attribute to recognition, regression coefficients

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3a	Model 3b	Model 3c	Model 3d	Model 3e	Model 3f
Respondent having a HED: <i>Ref. No</i>								
Yes	2.89***	1.65***	1.55***	1.05***	2.83***	.641	1.76***	4.71***
Father with a HED: <i>Ref. No</i>								
Yes		1.43***	1.41**	1.45***	1.42***	1.42***	1.42***	1.42***
Mother with a HED: <i>Ref. No</i>								
Yes		.53	-.04	.52	.53	.52	.52	.41
Gender: <i>Ref. Male</i>								
Female		-1.24***	-1.25***	-1.66***	-1.24***	-1.25***	-1.24***	-1.27***
Age		-.154***	-.16***	-.15***	-.16***	-.16***	-.15***	-.130***
Being in paid work: <i>Ref. No</i>								
Yes		1.89***	1.89***	1.87***	1.88***	1.53***	1.89***	1.94***
Living in a village: <i>Ref. No</i>								
Yes		-.95***	-.95***	-.95***	-.95***	-.96***	-.84***	-.95***
Belonging to a minority ethnic group: <i>Ref. No</i>								
Yes		-1.22***	-1.22***	-1.22***	-.80	-1.21***	-1.22***	-1.23***
Father with a HED *Respondent having a HED			-.004					
Mother with a HED *Respondent having a HED			.82					

Female*Respondent having a HED						1.111**		
Belonging to a minority ethnic group*Respondent having a HED						-1.25		
Being in paid work*Respondent having a HED						1.27**		
Living in a village*Respondent having a HED							-0.32	
Age*Respondent having a HED								-0.07***
Constant	48.45***	56.53***	56.58***	56.7***	56.14***	56.81***	56.48***	55.33***
ICC	0.070	.070	.066	.068	.070	.071	.069	.067

Source: European Social Survey 2018 (own calculations). Notes: N (individual level) = 27,646. N (country level) = 29. Significance: ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001. HED= higher education degree

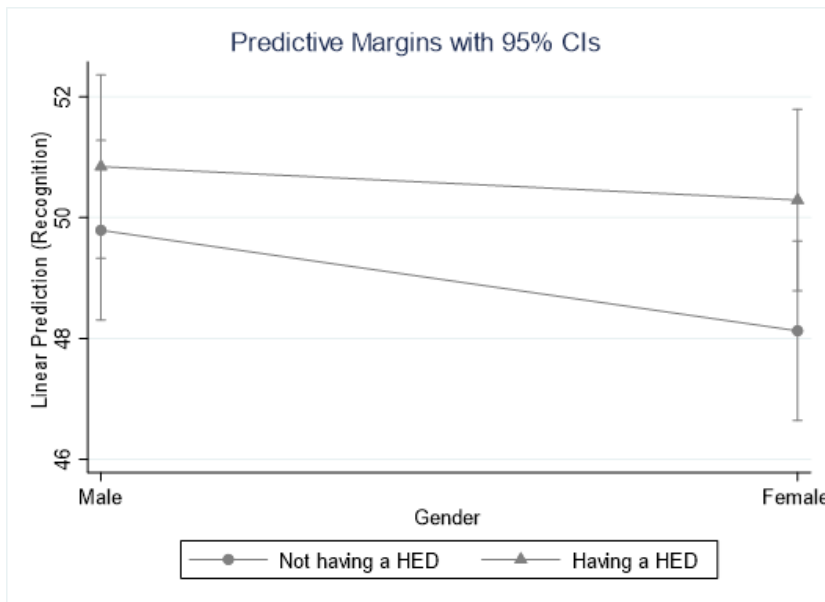


Figure 1. Average marginal effects in Model 3b in Table 1. CIs=confidence intervals; HED=higher education degree

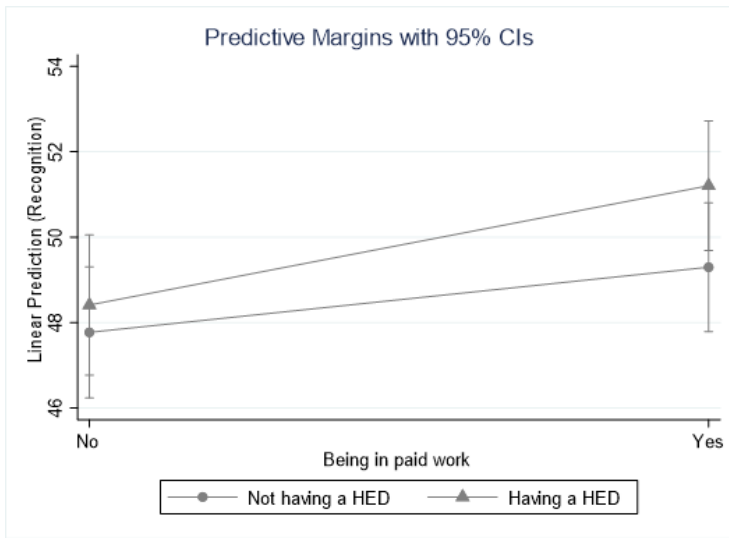


Figure 2. Average marginal effects in Model 3d in Table 1. CIs=confidence intervals; HED=higher education degree

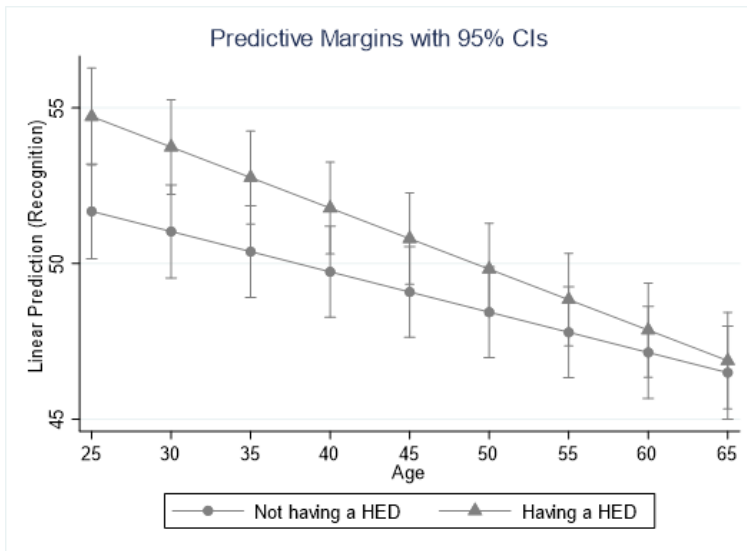


Figure 3. Average marginal effects in Model 3f in Table 1. CIs=confidence intervals; HED=higher education degree

Discussion and conclusions

The investigated association between higher education and recognition fits within a wider research focus on the social significance of higher education beyond economic and knowledge gains. The relationship between higher education and recognition, however, is a complex and understudied problem. Conceiving and critiquing higher education policies, practices, and effects through recognition has already been identified as heuristically promising (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova 2021; McArthur 2021). Adopting Honneth's account of recognition as a theoretical framework to make sense of and critique institutionalised intersubjective social relations, seems to offer an overarching perspective capable of extending our understanding of the impact of higher education with its values, processes, and practices on individuals and societies alike. The theory also allows for a close look at individual perceptions and experiences, which are constitutive to the social processes in and outside higher education and whose detailed study might be able to shed new light on the origin and dynamics of (in)equalities in higher education.

The analysis described above concludes there is a significant positive association between having a higher education degree and the value individuals attribute to receiving recognition when evaluated through data from the ninth ESS wave in 2018. It also reveals that age, gender, and employment status moderate this association. More specifically, while the strength of this positive association decreases by age, the value attributed to receiving recognition is greater among women with a higher education qualification and those higher education graduates who are in paid work. Based on this analysis, conclusions about the presence of causal links cannot be drawn; still, a question of reverse causality can be posed and needs to be tested in future research utilising experimental or longitudinal data. The relationship between having a higher education degree and attributing greater value to receiving recognition could work both ways. The experience of studying or completing a higher education degree might be expanding the individuals' understanding or need of the value of recognition. Equally likely, valuing recognition might be a factor influencing the decision to enrol in higher education.

Clearly, the ESS 2018 questionnaire is not specifically built to assess relations of recognition. In addition of having the usual problems of comparability in large international studies, the selected questions provide imperfect measures of the degree to which people value recognition as the survey addresses only partially such relations. Out of the chosen questions, the third one, for example, does not reflect an important nuance in Honneth's rendering of recognition which suggests that not all individual claims for recognition, or demands for respect, are justified. Honneth defends a pluralistic view as opposed to relativistic conceptions of social worth or merit (Honneth 1995). The assessment of claims for recognition and its theoretical grounding is naturally outside the scope of the article, which focuses on the individually perceived importance of receiving recognition for one's self-evaluated

abilities and achievements. Tailored questionnaires based on Honneth's theory in further quantitative but also qualitative studies would help overcome some of the limitations of the present study.

Whether individuals value recognition is an important indicator of the extent individuals are capable of developing productive relations-to-self and participating in transformative social relations. Arguably, such an estimation would also be a significant marker for the functioning of higher education and its institutions, but it is still only one aspect of the relationship between higher education and recognition in different higher education settings. Further research promises to improve the available measures of valuing recognition and also detail how relations of recognition span in higher education and how they impact individual and group experiences within higher education, HEIs, and their processes and practices. For example, the theory of recognition could be used to shed different light on the formative social conditions for individual student motivation and identity formation in higher education. This could lead in turn, if utilised smartly, to better informed institutional policy making, process planning and implementation, as well as pedagogical practice.

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✉ **Asen V. Dimitrov, PhD candidate**

ORCID iD: 0000-0003-0454-5983

✉ **Dr. Petya Ilieva-Trichkova, Assoc. Prof.**

ORCID iD: 0000-0002-2889-0047

Institute of Philosophy and Sociology

Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

1000 Sofia, Bulgaria

E-mail: asen.dimitrov.17@alumni.ucl.ac.uk;

petya.ilievat@gmail.com