

## Invisibilization and silencing as an ethical and sociological challenge

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### Abstract

Excluded and/or marginalized social groups frequently face problems involving representation in the public sphere. Moreover, the very notion of exclusion typically refers to communicatively or discursively produced mechanisms that lead a group to be considered irrelevant in public processes of communication. Exclusion and marginalization might therefore be understood as processes of silencing or invisibilizing social groups. The problems of representation are particularly serious in cases involving *social suffering*, i.e., socially produced suffering and/or suffering that can be eliminated or alleviated socially. Making silence heard, giving voice to the silenced and bringing the invisibilized back into the public domain are therefore fundamental tasks of solidarity in reaching a higher degree of social integration. The main aim of this article is to reveal how it is possible to disclose and understand the social grammar of the normative claims of silenced and invisibilized social groups. Therefore, grounded in Axel Honneth's Theory of Recognition, I first develop a theoretic model of criticism that elucidates silent and invisible suffering as universal normative language (I). Next, I develop a typology of silencing and invisibilizing that allows research attention to be directed towards specific fields of normative claims with different validity claims (II). Finally, I offer some general advice with regard to performing empirical research aimed at normative social criticism that considers the grammar of the silenced and invisible language of suffering (III).

**Keywords:** Social suffering, Recognition Theory, Axel Honneth, Frankfurt School

Excluded or marginalized social groups frequently face problems of representation in the public sphere. Moreover, the very notion of exclusion typically refers to communicatively (Habermas 1984, 1987; Luhmann 1997) or discursively (Foucault 1981; Herzog 2011) produced mechanisms of not being considered relevant in public processes of communication. Exclusion and marginalization might therefore be understood as processes of silencing or of invisibilizing important social groups.

Problems of representation are fundamental to Western democracies such as our own that are grounded in the notion of universal participation, although in fact there is a powerful order of discourse that impedes the participation of everyone under equal conditions. These problems are particularly serious regarding *social suffering*, i.e., socially produced suffering and/or suffering that can be eliminated or alleviated socially (Renault 2009). In these cases, the struggle against invisibilization and silencing becomes a question of fundamental justice. The vicious circle of physical and social invisibilization and silencing seems to seriously exacerbate the suffering of those marginalized groups who have entered the public sphere and the decision-making process, making it a question of fundamental justice to shatter those very processes of silencing and invisibilization. The hindrance of mutual understanding, i.e., of understanding the language of suffering, must therefore be understood as a social pathology that prevents society from developing its own normative potential, thus leading to social isolation instead of community building (Eribon 2011). Making silence heard, giving voice to the silenced and bringing the invisibilized back into the domain of the public is therefore a fundamental democratic task in our western societies as they face a growing crisis of representation.

The main objective of this article is to show how it is possible to disclose and to understand the social grammar of normative claims of silenced and invisibilized social groups and to uncover those mechanisms of invisibilization and silencing that structurally hinder the social perception of the normative content of suffering.

Therefore, grounded in Axel Honneth's Theory of Recognition, I first develop a theoretic model of criticism that elucidates silent and invisible suffering as universal normative language (I). Next, I develop a typology of silencing and invisibilizing that allows research interest to be directed towards specific fields of normative claims with different pretences to validity (II). Finally, I offer some general advice with regard to performing empirical research aimed at normative social criticism that considers the grammar of the silenced and invisible language of suffering (III).

Understanding silent and invisible claims or struggles for recognition can help create a greater awareness of what is at stake in the on-going processes of marginalization and exclusion of certain social groups. Giving voice to voiceless protests and silent answers opens political debates that unfold to allow social actors to take informed standpoints and make informed decisions.

## I Suffering as social critique

### *Types of social critique*

Normative sociology—sociology that not only describes its object but also aims to encourage certain social changes—faces serious theoretical and methodological challenges. Theoretically, it is unclear from where the normative criteria should be taken to offer a critique of a given social situation as good or bad, just or unjust, adequate or inadequate, and so on. There are three classical approaches to such critiques (see Jaeggi 2014): 1) An *external critique* takes its critical norms from outside the criticized object, e.g., from the particular perspective in which the critique is based or perhaps from a given text, such as a constitution, a religious text or the critic's personal reflection. A specific form of this critique is procedural in nature and criticizes an object based on the inadequate procedure that gave rise to it (e.g., Rawls 1999, Habermas 1984, 1987). However, here we remain in a mode of external critique as what is construed as inadequate is again alien to the object but based on the particular perspective of the critic or on some fundamental text, which nonetheless remains beyond the scope of the critique. 2) As opposed to the external critique's dependence on an outside perspective, an *internal critique* considers only the position of those criticized, aiming to find inconsistencies between proclaimed ideals and reality. However, such a critique cannot point towards more than internal inconsistencies. 3) The approach followed here is the third approach, which is that of *immanent critique*. The notion of immanent critique—a normative position developed within extant society that not only reveals the prospects for social change but also contributes to that change—is the type of critique that is predominant in the left-Hegelian tradition of the Frankfurt School (see also Browne 2008; Herzog 2016a, 2016b; Romero 2014; Stahl 2013,) and also described as immanent transcendence (Honneth 2000). The twin notions of *immanence* and *critique* or *transcendence* can be divided into two aspects: norms and methods. Norms stem from the normative present potential of the extant society (i.e., immanence) but point simultaneously towards a future society (i.e., transcendence and critique). As a methodology, the results should be developed completely from empirical material (immanence) but should also indicate a practical path or act as a powerful tool to change society (transcendence and critique).

The following table sums up the different types of critiques:

Table 1. Types of critique

	<b>Starting point</b>	<b>Basis of critique</b>
<i>External critique</i>	External	Contradiction between external criteria and existing practice.
<i>Procedural critique</i>	External	Contradiction between criteria stemming from fair procedures and reality.
<i>Internal critique</i>	Internal	Contradiction found in inconsistencies between internal ideals and reality.
<i>Immanent critique</i>	Internal	“Dialectical” contradiction inside society, crisis.

Source: adaption of Jaeggi 2014: 309.

The notion of dialectical contradiction in the immanent critique differs substantially from other uses of the term contradiction. Contradiction here means that there are systematic—or structural, if preferred—reasons for the non-fulfilment of the claims or promises. Contradiction does not simply involve a mere omission that might be corrected. Immanent critique is a transcending critique that surpasses a mere corrective critique by revealing the systemic difficulties involved with fulfilling these demands; in this manner, it is transcending immanent critique.

The theoretical problem for immanent social critique involves locating where this normative potential of societies should be taken from. For Marx, it was the pre-scientific practice of work that pointed towards a different and more emancipated society. However, the perspective on (industrial) labour leads to several problems for social critique. On one hand, industrial labour is not alone at the core of social reproduction. Indeed, service work, affective and/or “immaterial” labour also play an important role in the process of social reproduction (Hardt & Negri 2000). Taking into account the importance of language, discourses, culture, ideology, etc. in the reproduction of the social world, we might even speak of the discursive reproduction of the social world (see Keller et al. 2005). On the other hand, assuming the normative perspective from industrial labour became questionable because—rather than leading to emancipation—the fundamental characteristics of labour were used to organize the barbarity of the Holocaust. The industrial organization of millions of human deaths made it unlikely that a normative ground for social critique would be found in the logics of industrial labour.

Jürgen Habermas tries to overcome this “empirical” or “sociological deficit” of Marxist and post-Marxist critique by focusing on linguistic practices. In *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas (1984, 1987) treats speech acts as those pre-scientific practices whose normative content points towards understanding and emancipation. By engaging in speech acts, participants already accept the original validity of claims of truth, rightfulness and sincerity. By taking these norms to be inherent in social practices, Habermas attempts to develop a normative perspective capable of critiquing existing society.

However, Habermas’s disciple Axel Honneth—after enlisting the help of Michel Foucault—shows that there are important empirical flaws in the Habermasian approach. Even before publishing his doctoral thesis, Honneth writes: “My supposition is that the Habermasian social theory is constituted in the way that it has to ignore systematically all the existing forms of social critique that are not recognized in the political-hegemonic public space” (Honneth 2000: 112). In this sense, the Habermasian approach to language or discourse would fall into a certain vanguardism by focusing primarily on social actors with enough linguistic and social capital to participate in the public space. On the other hand, it is exactly this public space that is already pre-structured in a powerful way, producing several types of exclusions and marginalizations. Since Foucault’s critique of power in language and the myriad mechanisms of exclusion in its use (see e.g., Foucault 1981), the public sphere can no longer be imagined as a space in which free deliberation occurs. The public sphere must be understood as a space filled with mechanisms of exclusion, marginalization, and conscious and unconscious rules of participation; in short, it is a space of *invisibilization and silencing*.

### *Suffering as normative language*

In what follows, we will discuss suffering as a normative source of critique. The notion of social suffering was situated prominently by Pierre Bourdieu (1999) in the international academic debate and has since been used in various disciplines, such as political philosophy (Renault 2009), sociology (Wilson & Brown 2011) social psychology (Frost & Hoggett 2008) and criminal justice (Hillyard et al. 2004). Instead of pointing directly at material sources of misery, social suffering places human emotions at the heart of political, social and philosophical debates. Lived experiences of domination and repression—of disrespect, in Honneth’s words—lead to emotional reactions such as humiliation and despair, underlining the damage that social forces cause to individuals in both structured and/or systematic ways. Suffering frequently accompanies social exclusion, often along the classic lines of race, class and gender. For our research, it must be understood that suffering shows up in practices, affective reactions and/or embodiments that might be understood intersubjectively.

At this juncture, the notion that *social suffering* might be used as a normative guideline for grounding immanent critique comes into play (see Honneth 1992; Renault 2009, but also Adorno 1970). All individuals—regardless of their social position or degree of inclusion in so-

ciety—can suffer from the lack of recognition understood in ideal as well as in material terms. Therefore, immanent critique must evaluate social relations in light of the norm that social suffering should disappear or at least decrease. When speaking of *social* suffering, we refer to claims implicitly made by those who suffer against those who should have prevented or at least alleviated the suffering. Suffering is thus a normative language, but it is a social language—as opposed to an individual language—as social suffering is only possible within a community that has established certain norms. Thus, a person who is attacked by a tiger or who bumps his head against the door of the cupboard typically does not feel moral indignation, as there is no normative claim and therefore no social suffering. There are no moral exigencies towards the tiger or the cupboard. However, if we are attacked by another person or if other persons are in a position to alleviate our pain, then suffering inherits a social dimension; suffering then takes on the character of a normative language that contradicts societies' own norm that suffering should not exist.

For empirical social research, this conceptualization means that social researchers must analyse and reconstruct the normative grounds of society on the basis of social suffering. When this reconstruction refers to the official and explicit normative points of reference, it seems not to be too complicated for classic social research. We might consider analysing the discourses of powerful political, economic and social institutions and revealing the normative bases of their arguments. Such discourse analysis becomes slightly more complicated when we seek to emphasize the implicit normativity inherent in these discourses. However, revealing the implicit structures of discourses is everyday work for discourse analysts and should not be overly complicated. Nonetheless, the analysis becomes more difficult when we accept the proposition that socially accepted normativity is both a) immanent in *social practices* and b) often structurally hidden behind walls of silencing and invisibility. Now, we must find ways for a “normative reconstruction” (Honneth) of the normative contents not expressed explicitly. In addition, when analysing the normative content of practices or of the institutionalized, material social order, the critical approach requires *simultaneous* research on the normative claims, on one hand, and the development potential, the obstacles and the systemic or structural limitations that impede the unfolding of these normative claims, on the other. We can differentiate real, transcending immanent critique from merely corrective critique only by means of this second element, i.e., by showing that there are structural reasons that the normative shared and therefore justified claims cannot be fulfilled under the given social conditions. Immanent critique thus becomes social critique.

It thus becomes clear why such research must concentrate on both silencing and invisibilization. Silencing is a powerful mechanism that can be used to eliminate participation in public discourse, i.e., in the space in which the “struggles” or “games” (Foucault) about knowledge, definitions, practices and the distribution of power occur. Silenced social groups have no or less access to this space. Further, to enter this space, one must often leave a specific minority group and accept the hegemonic rules of the dominant segment of society (Spivak 1988). Invisibilization extends a step further and refers to the impossibility of perceiving the other in an empathic

way (Scotland-Stewart 2007). The moral claims of the other who is neither understood physically nor perceived socially as a similar human being do not have the same status as those of physical and social “equals”.

## **II A tentative typology of invisibilization and silencing of social suffering**

Notably, we can differentiate physical or material silencing and invisibilization from social silencing and invisibilization. On the one hand, some groups are *physically* prevented from entering the public sphere. Border controls physically impede the presence of many others in our societies, while segregation keeps severe poverty away from the public spaces in our city centres, and imprisonment invisibilizes a growing number of citizens. Furthermore, there is the “order of the discourse” (Foucault 1981), which allows only a small minority of stakeholders—politicians, journalists and/or experts with particular types of social and educational backgrounds—to dominate the public debate. Other social groups are seldom seen or heard. On the other hand, there is *social* invisibilization and silencing (Honneth 2001). This term refers to the socially created capacity “to look through” the other even when physically present. What is more, as Honneth explains, invisibility requires an active behavior, a will to “look through” the other, which “demands gestures or ways of behaving that make clear that the other is not seen not merely accidentally, but rather intentionally” (ibid. 112). For Honneth, this invisibilization is a “public fact”, i.e. the intention to overlook the other can be easily perceived by other persons present in the situation. In our highly anonymized and diverse society, we learn not to consider the other as a complex human being. Again, this “looking through” is more likely to occur with people of lower social status. For example, it has been thoroughly researched how employers ignore cleaning women in their household (Gutierrez 2007) and/or how black people are ignored in certain public spaces (Honneth 2001). Similar to social invisibility, we also find social silencing, i.e., taking less account of the voices of non-hegemonic groups (i.e., those of female, migrant, lower-class groups), even when expressed publicly.

We can develop a first, tentative typology of invisibilization and silencing of social suffering with the help of the Theory of Recognition developed by Honneth (1992). This theory seems particularly promising, as Honneth follows the concept of immanent critique as well as the communicative approach of his mentor, Habermas. However, in contrast to Habermas, Honneth does not identify the practices of communication as pre-scientific moral experiences that are subjects of immanent critique. Instead, he turns his eye towards (often silent) emotional reactions to disrespect. In particular, Honneth identifies three spheres and three modes of recognition in his theory. Following Hegel, in the family, individuals are recognized as having concrete needs in the mode of love. In civil society, citizens’ formal autonomy is recognized by and inherent in their rights. In the state, affective intuition regarding the family and the cognitive concept

of rights are somehow sublated (*aufgehoben*)<sup>1</sup> into intellectual intuition (or the “affect made rational”). The mode of recognition is thus solidarity between subjects who are each possessed of specific individuality. Unlike Hegel, whose early work inspires Honneth’s use of the concept of recognition, Honneth does not see these three spheres as participating in a process in which one sphere leads to the creation of another and which finally comes to an end in the dialectical generation of the (Prussian) state. For Honneth, modern societies have three parallel, interwoven spheres with three equally important modes of recognition.

What is important for Honneth is that each sphere corresponds to a specific dimension of personality and practical self-relation. For successful self-relation, recognition must be experienced in all three spheres. Otherwise, one component of the personality is threatened. Honneth summarizes his approach as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Honneth’s Theory of Recognition

<b>S p h e r e o f recognition</b>	Family	State	Civil Society
<b>M o d e o f recognition</b>	Emotional support	Cognitive respect	Social esteem
<b>D i m e n s i o n o f personality</b>	N e e d s a n d emotions	Moral responsibility	Traits and abilities
<b>F o r m s o f recognition</b>	P r i m a r y relationships (love, friendship)	Legal relation (rights)	Community of value (solidarity)
<b>D e v e l o p m e n t a l potential</b>	F r e e d o m f r o m e c o n o m i c restrictions, for example	Generalization, de-formalization	Individualization, equalization
<b>P r a c t i c a l r e l a t i o n - t o - s e l f</b>	B a s i c s e l f - c o n f i d e n c e	Self-respect	Self-esteem
<b>F o r m s o f disrespect</b>	Abuse and rape	Denial of rights, exclusion	Denigration, insult
<b>T h r e a t e n e d component of personality</b>	Physical integrity	Social integrity	‘Honour’, dignity

(Honneth, 1992: 129—slightly expanded)

<sup>1</sup> For information regarding the complex meaning and translation of *aufheben* and *Aufhebung*, see Froeb, 2012.

Here, we can observe the three spheres of recognition and how each corresponds to a different mode of recognition: emotional support, cognitive respect and social esteem. In our society, each of these modes is linked to a specific form of recognition. For this reason, most authors, such as Thomson (2006), do not discriminate between modes and forms and instead speak directly about the following three modes: love, respect, and esteem. As we can see, for Honneth, there is potential for development in these different modes of recognition, which is one reason why the process or “struggle” for recognition has not yet come to an end: love in families can be liberated from economic pressures (Honneth in: Fraser and Honneth 2003: 139), and rights can be generalized or esteem can be distributed in a more individualized manner. What is important is that all these modes refer to specific dimensions of personality and that if one part of someone’s personality is disrespected, that disrespect can lead not only to social disintegration but also to serious damage to one’s self-relation and therefore to socially produced suffering. In other words: what holds together these three different spheres is their relation to the autonomy of the individual, an autonomy that is understood as “social freedom” (Honneth 2011), i.e., as achievable only in dialogical relation to others.

All of this brings us back to our question regarding how to empirically ground the norms that we use to criticize society. Now, we can say that the moral, pre-scientific experience upon which we rely is the capacity to suffer disrespect. This capacity overcomes certain theoretical problems of the Habermasian approach to discourses. It is democratic in the sense that everybody is capable of feeling social suffering. Suffering is not limited to those able to discursively articulate that suffering or to articulate a coherent approach to a social order in which that suffering has been abolished. Although unarticulated, suffering might also be understood as a language because others can empathically understand that suffering, which opens the path for empirical research because the critical researcher is also able to “read” the suffering of others. However, for the critic, this suffering points to a pathological social order, i.e., an order that does not permit individuals to become fully autonomous. Moreover, unlike suffering that is neither made by humans nor able to be abolished by humans, social suffering is only possible because individuals—often unconsciously—have claims involving recognition. For example, it is only because I claim that my neighbour should greet me when he sees me on the street that I can feel disregarded when he fails to do so. At this juncture, we can see how individuals’ pre-scientific reactions towards disrespect are relegated to those normative claims inherent in social practices. With the Honnethian relation of claims of recognition and successful self-realization, these affective reactions and normative claims point towards emancipation—in this case, towards a society that allows its members full or at least broader autonomy. This approach, therefore, is not only immanent but also transcendent because it exceeds the dictates of the given social order. We might therefore reformulate the famous Habermasian sentence in recognitional terms: Autonomy or emancipation is immanent as the objective of social suffering.

Following Honneth’s model of three different types of recognition in three different social spheres of modern societies, we can build a first, tentative typology of invisibilization and silencing. Invisibilization and silencing would then be specific forms of misrecognition, a lack of attention towards specific groups and their needs for emotional support, cognitive respect and social esteem. Honneth treats emotional support as a mode of recognition in the intimate sphere and cognitive respect and social esteem in the state and civil society spheres, respectively. The opposite, misrecognition that leads to social suffering, would therefore stem from a lack of emotional support, respect and esteem. Table 3 shows how silencing and invisibilization have a (socially created) individual side, i.e., the individual is impeded in formulating or making visible its claim for recognition; however, there are also mechanisms that prevent society from understanding the normative language of suffering, blinding and deafening its members through social processes related to marginalization and the devaluation of “the other”.

Table 3. First typology of invisibilization and silencing of social suffering

	<i>Individuals (those who suffer)</i>		<i>Social observer</i>	
	<b>Silencing</b>	<b>Invisibilization</b>	<b>Silencing</b>	<b>Invisibilization</b>
<b>Claim for: Emotional Support</b>	e.g., silencing due to shame (lack of self-confidence)	e.g., hiding for shame (lack of self-confidence)	e.g., perception of the needs of the other as less urgent	e.g., physical separation
<b>Claim for: Cognitive Respect</b>	e.g., self-silencing due to lack of self-respect	e.g., refraining from political participation due to lack of self-respect	e.g., limitations of democratic participation rights	e.g., social segregation, particularly in the public space
<b>Claim for: Social Esteem</b>	e.g., lack of self-esteem leading to not raising one’s voice	e.g., hiding (one’s competences) due to lack of self-esteem	e.g., social devaluation of the traits and abilities of the other	e.g., workplace segregation

As stated at the top of this article, both silencing and invisibilization can have both a physical and a material component by literally preventing someone from being seen or heard. However, silencing and invisibilization can also be social constructions that guide our attentions away from certain social groups, which resembles “looking-through” a physically present person. Empirical research on the moral language of marginalized groups shows that the moral experiences of individual members of such groups are seldom formulated positively but that they nevertheless have a clear intuitive feeling of violations of justice (for a classic example, see Moore 1978). Understanding suffering as language broadens the communicative approach of Habermas, including broader social actors into the communicative field and avoiding the bias associated with the fact that the public sphere is often highly pre-structured.

This typology might help to illuminate current debates on social exclusion. For example, we could cite the multiple invisibilities produced around the “burka in public spaces” debate in Europe. We can see how the burka leads to the physical invisibility of the anthropomorphic aspect of its wearer but that there are other (more) social mechanisms in play that seem to exacerbate the perception of women who wear the burka as relevant to the discourse. The discourse regarding the burka is mainly a discourse *about* and not *with* those who wear it (see also: Bracke & Fadil 2012). Using our typology, we might see, for example, how Muslim women are frequently portrayed in discourses as underdeveloped or illiterate, which leads to problems in civil society, not only on the labour market but also in debates regarding the nationalization of Muslim migrants. In both spheres—that of civil society and that of the state—we can find both processes of segregation, i.e., invisibilization, and processes of silencing, i.e., talking about instead of with Muslim women, particularly those who wear the burka.<sup>2</sup>

### III Methodological advice<sup>3</sup>

When understanding suffering as language and as a communicative process, empirical research can draw upon insights from discourse theory with its understanding of the relationship between language, practices and context (see Angermuller 2007). However, as we have shown, there are difficulties because not all feelings of injustice that are perceived by social actors (and therefore that might theoretically be used for the purpose of social critique) are expressed in discourses. Moreover, “language theft” (Honneth) is often attached to the problem of suffering. Suffering frequently is capable of both impeding discursive expressions and producing silent or muted

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<sup>2</sup> There is a vast literature about diverse aspects of the burka/headscarf debate from sociological, legal, political or feminist studies. See e.g. for the Spanish case: Griera & Burchardt (2016), or for the French debate: El Hamel (2002). A good overview about the differences across Europe is offered by McGoldrick (2006).

<sup>3</sup> This chapter draws on methodological insights first published in my book, “Discourse Analysis as Social Critique” (Herzog 2016b).

subjects (see also Renault 2009). Therefore, we must broaden our approach in discourse analysis to include non-discursive realities, materialities, practices, etc., which means that we must continue to perform discourse analysis. However, in the contemporary analysis of language, text and talk must be replaced by the (universal) language of social suffering. Affective reactions to disrespect must be read empathically by the researcher in the manner in which traditional language is understood. Suffering—and affective reactions to suffering—can be understood as a) meaningful and b) structured elements of social life. Hence, we can undertake procedures that are similar to those in classical (qualitative) discourse analysis to elucidate the structure and meaning of the claims of recognition underlying social suffering like a moral grammar.

This broader discursive approach—or the more sociological approach to discourses—is based on the anthropological assumption that human beings are able to empathically understand the suffering of others. When seeing others suffering, when perceiving the struggle against social suffering—the struggle against the disrespect of others—then we are able to empathically engage in this struggle. In other words, the struggle against disrespect becomes part of the often-silent movement for social emancipation. As we have shown, our problem of invisibilization and silencing comes into play at this juncture: there are many social mechanisms that disguise the suffering of others, i.e., social mechanisms that impede the perception of the other as a suffering human being similar to oneself. When impeding empathically social relations, suffering can be inflicted upon others without becoming obviously social.

One of the anchor points of the argument that contends that it is still possible to resist invisibilization is grounded in a process related to the psychology of development—in the fact that humans learn through imitation.<sup>4</sup> Following this Freudian notion of anthropology, humans must have the innate capacity for empathy. However, this “original” capacity can be destroyed by “instrumental reason”, i.e., through processes of invisibilization and silencing. In his interpretation of Freud, Adorno states—and Honneth (2005) seems to follow this argument—that individuals also suffer when their innate capacity for reason is destroyed or limited, including the capacity for empathic reason. Therefore, this type of suffering points towards abolishing the obstacles to developing empathy. For social researchers, we can thus empathically suffer and also understand suffering, whether that suffering is caused by disrespect or by the destruction of empathic reasoning. The struggle for recognition must therefore be understood as a non-verbal, empathic theory of communicative action. In the same way that a language points towards a linguistic community that (in principle) shares common basic understandings of the words, empathy points towards a common shared normativity. It could be argued that there is a problem of “really understanding” moral experiences that one has not lived through. However, as long as we live in a (broad) normative community with others, we can (in principle) understand the basic aspects of their suffering just as we understand others when they talk to us without “really”

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<sup>4</sup> On the physiological level, the capacity to imitate is related to the existence of so-called mirror neurons.

being in their position. At the beginning, moreover, it seems even easier to analyse suffering or disrespect as negative events instead of as direct claims to recognition because negative events are typically clearer and more easily comprehensible than positive manifestations (see also: Honneth 2011).

However, the existence of the theoretical possibility of suffering—whether direct suffering or suffering caused by the destruction of empathic reasoning and the ability to empathically understand the suffering of others—does not guarantee, *in principle*, the social researcher’s empathic perceptions. In other words, it is frequently quite difficult to empathically understand the socially silenced suffering of others. Social pathologies that produce structural feelings of disrespect are frequently difficult to perceive at least in part because of the limitations of established techniques of social research. “However, only very seldom do we encounter symptoms of this type [of social pathologies, B.H.] in the form of results of empirical research: the instruments of analysis of sociological research, although used qualitatively, generally speaking are not subtle enough to draw light on diffuse states of mind or on these type of collective mental states” (Honneth 2011: 158).

One method of penetrating the veil of obfuscation of social suffering is to turn towards expressions of highly sensitive social actors, such as artists and the analysis of aesthetic products. Aesthetic products are frequently better able to express social processes. They aim at a different, non-linguistic form of understanding social reality. Certain aesthetic products can help us to understand both the suffering of others and the processes of obfuscation that impede the perception of that suffering. This proposal is similar to that referenced by Honneth’s critique when he asserts, “the best way of diagnosing these pathologies still is as in the time of Hegel or of the young Lukács, the analysis of aesthetic testimonies in which these symptoms are presented indirectly: the novels, the movies or the artworks still contain that material from which we can obtain primarily knowledge about whether in our time there could be detected tendencies of a reflexive deformation of a superior level of the social behaviour and how widespread they are” (ibid). In that sense, we can understand art as moral mimesis. Art imitates human actions. In one form or another, these actions are morally shaped, and art can therefore help us decipher social normativity. Nonetheless, Landy (2008) states that art consumers only “learn” about moral behaviour they already believe in. However, what they believe in is the normative framework common to those who suffer. In that sense, we do not learn new norms through aesthetic products, but we can be made aware of our common normative ground and the hidden injuries of certain social groups due to the failure to meet certain norms. Additionally, we should take into account that art is not generally reducible to a simple doubling of reality, as Adorno underlines in a dialectical turn. Instead, art is at the same time a “constellation”, a necessarily incomplete approximation that also points towards what is *not* the case (Adorno 2009).

As stated above, in his analysis, Honneth frequently uses specific aesthetic products such as novels or movies to ground his argument. In the tradition of the Frankfurt school, this analysis

need not even focus on a specific product, such as a work of art, as it can also focus on and analyse a style, a historic trend or a tendency expressed aesthetically. In that sense, for Siegfried Kracauer, first-generation Frankfurt School author, these expressions are even more valuable and revealing because of their unconscious character: “The position that an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions than from that epoch's judgments about itself. Since these judgments are expressions of the tendencies of a particular era, they do not offer conclusive testimony about its overall constitution. The surface-level expressions, however, by virtue of their unconscious nature, provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things. Conversely, knowledge of this state of things depends on the interpretation of these surface-level expressions. The fundamental substance of an epoch and its unheeded impulses illuminate each other reciprocally” (Kracauer 1995: 75). Another reason for dedicating ourselves to physical expressions, in general, is the conviction shared not only by Adorno and Honneth but also by the Foucauldian tradition that intellectual activity is also expressed in human bodies, practices, behaviours, and aesthetic products or, in short, in various physical forms of life. With the approach presented herein, these physical expressions must be understood as (part of) intersubjective and understandable discourses.

Sociology must be aware of the need to strengthen its approaches with regard to the analysis of the silenced and invisibilized if it wants to make a serious contribution to ensuring the inclusion of marginalized social groups. Taking into account that the public discursive space is highly structured by powerful mechanisms of exclusion, social research must broaden its methodological approach towards less language-centred research techniques without shedding the communicative approach inherent in the analysis of language. This need stems from a fundamental ethical and democratic challenge: to overcome social exclusion, to give voice to the voiceless and to visualize invisibilized suffering.

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