Rituals of recognition: Interactions and interaction rules in sheltered workshops in the Netherlands

Melissa Sebrechts\textsuperscript{a}, Evelien Tonkens\textsuperscript{b} and Christian Bröer\textsuperscript{c}

\textsuperscript{a}Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands; \textsuperscript{b}Citizenship and the Humanisation of Institutions and Organisations, University for Humanistic Studies, Utrecht, Netherlands; \textsuperscript{c}Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

ABSTRACT
Recent decades have witnessed mounting attention to the theme of recognition, both in public policy and in the academic world. Scholarly debate on recognition is dominated by philosophers, while the policy debate is dominated by political and educational perspectives. A sociological perspective has scarcely been developed. In this article, we approach recognition as a sociological phenomenon with the aid of Collins’ theory of Interaction Ritual Chains. Our research is located in three Dutch sheltered workshops that aim to provide recognition through work to young men with mild intellectual disabilities. While Collins provides an interesting interactional perspective to distinguish between different situations of recognition, we add an institutional dimension by showing how individualising labour-market policies and care practices articulate a set of ‘interaction rules’ that encourage some recognition rituals and foreclose others. This demonstrates the importance of a sociological contribution to the debate on recognition, and points to ‘unintended consequences’ of policies that aim to strengthen recognition in ways that in fact cannot be achieved by those involved. Such a sociological perspective can bring out more practical and nuanced accounts of recognition, and enrich both scholarly and policy debates on this topic.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 10 July 2017; Accepted 7 April 2018

KEYWORDS
Recognition; welfare state; sheltered employment; intellectual disability; inclusive citizenship

Introduction

The theme of recognition has attracted public and scholarly attention over recent decades (Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Lister, 2008; Thompson, 2006; Zurn, 2015). The right to be recognised, appreciated, and valued has
also become key in public policies (Craig, Burchardt, & Gordon, 2008). Sociologists, however, have so far shown limited interest in recognition – with some exceptions (Heinich, 2009; Houston, 2015; May, 2016; Petersen & Willig, 2002; Sointu, 2006). The scholarly debate is dominated by social philosophers (Fraser, 1996, 2000; Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Honneth, 2001, 2004; Taylor, 1994; Thompson, 2006), who often discuss recognition in relation to redistribution in the context of complementary or competing foundations of social justice (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Heinich suggests that the lack of sociological attention to recognition might be explained by the dominance of approaches to economic or political domination that are the legacy of Marx, Bourdieu, and Foucault. She argues that ‘the study of recognition necessitates a major paradigm shift away from the theories of economic or political domination […] toward theories of interdependency – a sociological and philosophical literature that is less well-known’ (Heinich, 2009, p. 86).

There are, however, some sociological (and anthropological) studies on recognition in the area of work (Grover, 2014; Hancock, 2016; Holtgrew, 2001; Islam, 2012; Juul, 2012). These point out that employment is not just about becoming economically self-sustaining, but also about feeling socially and culturally included and about being valued for one’s contributions (Todorov, 2001, p. 87). Most of these studies are based on the work of the social philosophers mentioned above: Fraser, Honneth, and Taylor. In some of his more recent writings, Axel Honneth also devotes attention to institutions and work, stressing that our experiences of social esteem are directly dependent upon the societal institutionalisation and division of labour (Honneth, 2007a, 2007b, 2014; Marcelo, 2013; Zurn, 2015). However, there remains limited exploration of how recognition actually works as a sociological phenomenon, that is, as a social, interactive process in an institutional setting.

In this paper, we want to explore a sociological perspective on recognition further. We do so by connecting the theme of recognition to the work of one of the most important sociologists of our time, Randall Collins. We use Collins’ framework of Interaction Rituals Chains (2004) as a framework for studying recognition as a social process in action. Armed with Collins’ concepts, we hope to show how sociologists can better study recognition in situ, as an interactive social process in institutional settings, or even, in Collins’ terms, as a ritual.

Our sociological study of recognition in action is concentrated on a group with a fragile and marginal social position and concomitantly limited chances for recognition: young men with mild intellectual
disabilities (MID). We focus on institutions that are intended to grant them recognition: sheltered workshops (SWs from now on), in an urban area in the Netherlands. We aim to show how SWs provide ‘interaction rules’ that make some recognition rituals more possible than others. Particularly, we point to how individualising labour-market- and care policies make their way into everyday professional practices and interactions of recognition among young men with MID. It is within this larger framework that we situate a detailed analysis of everyday recognition rituals. Our article builds on two years of ethnographic fieldwork in three SWs in an urban area in the Netherlands.

**Interaction rituals and interaction rules**

Before we turn to a sociological perspective on recognition, we will briefly introduce the main philosophical authors on whom most social scientific work on recognition builds, including our own: Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser. Their theories differ considerably. While Fraser concentrates on institutions and understands recognition as equal participation in social life (1995, 2000, 2001), Honneth mainly looks at interactions between subjects and sees recognition as fundamental for individuals’ positive self-relations (1992, 1996). Both agree that in order to arrive at a more just society, we need an equal distribution of goods, wealth, and power, and equal opportunities for feeling recognised. Both authors also stress the intersubjective character of recognition, albeit in different ways. Honneth focuses on interactions between individuals, while Fraser is more concerned with groups, (legal) institutions, and society at large. For Fraser, recognition through work is about equal participation in social life, while for Honneth, it is about being able to develop positive relations to oneself and others.

Despite this focus on its intersubjective character, recognition remains a relatively abstract concept. There is little attention to the conditions that allow for mutual recognition to emerge at work (for exceptions, see Holtgrewe, 2001; Islam, 2012). We focus on SWs for people with MID as spaces where recognition is intended to arise. Concerning people with MID, the right to be recognised is a response to failed ‘social integration’ (Van Gennep, 1994), resulting in misrecognition, negative self-feelings, and experiences of solitude (Bigby & Wiesel, 2011; Butcher & Wilton, 2008; Hall, 2005, 2010; Verplanke & Duyvendak, 2010; ZonMw, 2015, p. 35). To achieve recognition, participation in (sheltered) work is presented as the most promising way forward. In (sheltered) work, people with MID are to be recognised for their abilities and ‘leave a life of
social exclusion that was common under the old welfare-state regime, reducing their stigmatised status as secondary citizens and increasing their health and well-being’ (Holmqvist, 2010, p. 211). Thus, work is not concerned only with keeping people with disabilities busy, but is about enabling them to have a ‘meaningful job’ (Butcher & Wilton, 2008; Hall & Wilton, 2011; Stavenuiter, van der Klein, & Bulsink, 2014).

We want to contribute to a difficult but much-needed sociological perspective on recognition with the aid of Randall Collins’ theory of Interaction Ritual Chains (2004), and to investigate how different forms of recognition are shaped in daily interactions. Inspired by Durkheim and Goffman, Collins points to the everydayness and fluidity of rituals. He understands them as products of micro-situational action rather than as part of the structure of society (2004, p. 7). He devotes theoretical attention to emotions and emotional energy as emerging from what he calls interaction rituals (IRs). IRs have four main ingredients: bodily co-presence, shared focus, boundaries vis-à-vis outsiders, and common mood or emotional experience. Bodily co-presence enables participants to synchronise and to become entrained in each other’s movements (Collins, 2004, p. 47). Such physical being-together enables participants to develop a mutual focus of attention on a common object or activity. In this process, boundaries are drawn vis-à-vis outsiders who do not partake in the shared focus and activities, and insiders in the ritual come to share a common mood (2004). As Collins convincingly argues, all these ingredients feed back into one another and intensify the outcomes. The shared emotional mood intensifies, while participants become focused on each other’s presence and on their shared focus: ‘Members of a cheering crowd become more enthusiastic, just as participants at a religious service become more respectful and solemn, or at a funeral become more sorrowful, than before they began’ (2004, p. 48).

According to Collins, an IR is successful when it produces shared symbols, solidarity, morality, and emotional energy (2004, p. 48). Rituals create shared symbols that come to represent the group and the social relationships within that group: be this in the form of a visual symbol, a song, or an idea (2004, p. 49). Through such a shared symbolism, (pockets of) solidarity – which Collins understands as a feeling of group membership and belonging – as well as feelings of morality are created and upheld (2004, pp. 48–49). Additionally, emotional energy gives the individual ‘a feeling of confidence, elation, strength, enthusiasm, and initiative in taking action’ (2004, p. 49).

While Collins does not use the term ‘recognition’, we contend that the interactionally generated emotional experiences that he identifies can be
understood as recognition. His language of emotional experiences closely links with Honneth’s focus on the moral and emotional reactions that recognition or a lack thereof brings to individuals, including self-confidence and self-esteem (Honneth, 1992, 1996; Zurn, 2015, pp. 14–15). But while Honneth and theories of recognition more generally remain abstract about how such experiences come about, Collins proposes a set of concrete elements. In the empirical part of this article, we show how some of these elements, such as the moving together of bodies, shared focus, and shared mood, can be useful for breaking down and analysing experiences of recognition in action.

Using Collins’ framework for investigating how recognition is shaped in everyday practices offers a set of advantages. First, Collins’ framework shifts our gaze from recognition as an individual experience to recognition as collective experience, and helps us to identify and concretise fundamentally intersubjective situations of recognition. The second advantage of Collins’ framework is that it allows us to focus on the bodily side of recognition. This is rarely done, except in disability studies (Danermark & Gellerstedt, 2004; Pols, 2013 for empirical studies on dignity). Recognition can result from how bodies move together, how they are oriented towards a shared object or activity, and become entrained in the same mood. In this article, then, we approach recognition as an experience that is shaped in (bodily) interactions between people; that has a strong emotional component (Honneth), but that is also heavily structured by institutions that articulate which actions are (more) recognisable (than others) (Fraser).

However, despite these advantages, Collins’ theory leaves us puzzled about why some rituals and forms of recognition are more recurrent than others. This reflects a more general absence of institutions in Collins’ theory: except for the immediate and present conditions of bodily co-presence and so forth, what other, perhaps more structural conditions are necessary for IRs to occur and to be ‘successful’? To fill this gap, we integrate institutions in our Collins-like analysis of daily interactions at the workplace. We speak of institutionalised ‘interaction rules’ and show the crucial role they play in stimulating some rituals of recognition while foreclosing others.

**Methods and locations**

‘CareWell’ is a Dutch care organisation that presents itself as inclusive and welcoming to all people who need support and care (frail older people, people with disabilities, people with psychiatric problems). Six thousand professionals and 2500 volunteers ‘take responsibility for the development
of long-term care in the city’ (CareWell, 2016a, p. 6) and care for 20,000 people. Within the domain of support for people with MID, CareWell organises various employment opportunities, among them sheltered work. SWs are aimed at those clients who are not (yet) ‘good enough’ for regular employment but too good for occupational activities. Attendance at the SW is not a condition for receiving disability benefits, but it is a condition for (supported) living at CareWell. This is, however, not enforced in practice because it conflicts with the principle that care organisations have a duty of care.

The three SWs for people with MID central to this research will be called Repair, Garden, and Shop. Repair and Garden are completely sheltered, while Shop is semi-sheltered: clients there have regular encounters with customers but are supervised by CareWell. Fieldwork was carried out by the first author of this article.

We focus on men, as there happened to be hardly any women in the SWs included in this study. In Repair, the researcher was the only woman, at Garden there was one female supervisor and at Shop there was (temporarily) one female collaborator. The researcher’s ‘gender’ was a recurring issue. With no age difference, some of the young men needed to understand the researcher was not ‘girlfriend material’, for example. After a while, some collaborators would point this out to their (new) colleagues. Gender and the positionality of the researcher became a daily conversational topic.

Ten to 25 ‘collaborators’, the name they preferred (rather than ‘clients’ or ‘people with MID’), worked in each project. Their age range varied from approximately 18 to 60, but in this research we focus on a group of collaborators aged 18–30. Per project there are between two and five professionals. In total, 37 collaborators, 16 professionals (including interns), and six volunteers were included in the study. Over the course of two years, 588 hours of participant observation were carried out, divided over the three work projects of Repair, Garden, and Shop, resulting in 306 pages of notes. This period also included 25 conversations with professionals working on different levels of CareWell (from daily supervision to coordination and management), and attendance at five formal meetings on the management level. At the end of the period of participant observation, the researcher conducted 19 semi-structured interviews with collaborators from the different work projects. Notes were taken during fieldwork, mostly on a cell phone. Notes were transcribed the same day in order to stay as close to the lived events and situations as possible. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and, together with all field notes, analysed thematically (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) in Atlas.ti.
The researcher informally and repeatedly described her study to collaborators as a study, with the intended outcome of a ‘book’, about their life-world and daily experiences as collaborators of an SW run by CareWell. Collaborators regularly asked how work on ‘the book’ was going, or were curious about whether the researcher had written about them. This suggests that collaborators understood at least partially what the researcher was doing. Verbal informed consent (in almost all cases recorded) was obtained from all participants.¹

Approaching recognition through IRs implies that the researcher partially used herself as the measuring instrument for recognition. By engaging in participant observation over the course of two years, she witnessed collaborators’ emotions and interactional dynamics. Getting to know the young men personally, almost as friends, and bringing in her own emotions and sensitivity allowed her to distinguish between moments in which collaborators felt enthusiastic, happy, or elated, and moments in which they felt unhappy, bored, or miserable. By processing felt emotions through a moment of reflection, these are used as an additional source of knowledge (see also Davies & Spencer, 2010) to distinguish between different recognition rituals. This contributes to what is sometimes called an ‘evocative ethnography’ (Skoggaard & Waterston, 2015; Stoller, 2005) in which different senses are actively incorporated in the gathering, analysis, and writing up of the research. Such a form of ethnography meets the challenge to make room for, and hold onto, feelings and affect in its description and explanation.

**Institutionalising recognition**

In most Western welfare states, including the Netherlands, policies are geared towards ‘active citizenship’: reducing citizens’ dependence on collective welfare-state arrangements and stimulating them to take (more) responsibility (Newman & Tonkens, 2011) and find paid work (Holmqvist, 2010; Van Berkel & Borghi, 2008). Individuals who are helped through measures such as sheltered employment are supposed to take responsibility for their self-development and make efforts with regard to their participation and social inclusion in the regular labour market (Holmqvist, 2010; Newman & Tonkens, 2011; Van Berkel & Borghi, 2008).

The work projects included in this study are no exception to this. A policy adopted in 2014 articulated two goals. First, to go from a client-based model to a market- and product-based model for SWs. Second,
for clients to gain emotional support and achieve recognition through (sheltered but almost ‘real’) work which the market is willing to pay for.

The first goal, towards a market model, co-occurred with budget cuts at CareWell. SWs needed to become economically self-sustaining. While before, SWs had been focused on clients’ personal needs and on offering ‘pleasant daytime activities’, they were now prompted to emphasise production, and transition towards regular employment (CareWell, 2016b, p. 14). In this process, individual responsibility – in line with activating social policies – gained importance. In CareWell’s work-related programmes, the general goal of individual responsibility is further specified and implemented – for example, by stressing individual motivation (2014b, p. 7): ‘It all starts with you. What matters most is that you want to get started. And that you want to do, what you can do’ (CareWell, 2016b, p. 3, authors’ translation). Motivation, enthusiasm, and work ethic are crucial in this process because ‘how far you get depends upon your own possibilities, dedication, and effort’ (2016b, p. 4, authors’ translation).

Participation in ‘real’ work is intended to produce not only economic gain, but also a ‘feeling gain’ for clients. It is to prevent clients from losing focus (CareWell, 2014c, p. 7). Instead, clients will increasingly experience positive self-feelings: ‘When they start working, you really see their self-esteem increase’ (CareWell, 2014a, p. 13). SWs will bring recognition: ‘Through work, people with MID can explore what they really want and can do. The SW is a place where you can be yourself and be appreciated for who you are’ (CareWell, 2010, p. 8, authors’ translation). Despite efforts to mimic ‘real’ work, demands must be limited, people’s ‘differences’ must be acknowledged and support is normal, so that that people can experience recognition by participation through sheltered, ‘meaningful’ work (CareWell, 2014b, 2016a).

In sum, SWs are meant to provide people with MID with recognition and meaningful activities through training and production that are increasingly embedded in a proxy-market. We understand this form of recognition as recognition based upon young men’s roles and achievements as apprentices or, in brief, ‘apprentice-recognition’.

**Studying everyday interactions**

**The lack of apprentice-recognition**

We now turn to everyday interactions at work to find out whether and how apprentice-recognition arises. In the projects we studied,
production-oriented labour that itself brings apprentice-recognition turned out to be scarce. Most young men with MID included in this research fail to live up to the demands involved. Only a few are able to work in more demanding projects such as Shop, or, in exceptional cases, move on to regular jobs. In 2015, of 671 clients working in CareWell’s SWs, only 15 (2.23%) moved on to regular work. Three of these were no longer employed at the time of writing this article. Most of the remaining 12 who are still employed have temporary contracts (and, so far, there seems very little chance that these will be turned into permanent contracts). So most young men included in this study end up in SWs like Repair and Garden and stay there for long periods of time. Employees of CareWell sporadically called these the ‘leftover projects’ or even the ‘dust-bins’ of CareWell.

Daily life in Repair and Garden is characterised by long stretches of sitting and hanging around:

When I arrive at Repair, Anass, Rivano, and Mitchell are sitting in the canteen. An atmosphere of boredom pervades the scene. Several hours later they are still sitting there, all three of them with their earphones plugged in and with their phones in their hands. Anass asks me what time it is and wants to know whether it is almost time to go home. A big sigh follows when I say it is only 14:00 and work only officially ends at 15:30. Outside, two professionals are working with less than a handful of collaborators. I sit down with the young men in the canteen and wait. Nothing happens, they stay there, I watch them, and in the next half hour no professional comes in. The young men remain focused on their phones. When I get up and ask them if they don’t have work to do, nobody answers. They don’t even seem to hear my question.

In such moments, there is little energy: collaborators stay inside the shed and play with their phones, stare, feel bored, and complain about it. They do not focus on each other and the atmosphere feels drained. In Collins’ terms, we can speak of a ‘failed ritual’: there is ‘little or no feeling of group solidarity; no sense of one’s identity as affirmed or changed; no respect for the group’s symbols; no heightened emotional energy … ’ (2004, p. 51). The effects of such a failed ritual were felt by the researcher too. Although in a completely different situation, she experienced first-hand what the absence of work-activities (and at least she had observations to make!) did to her. Doing nothing made her feel uncomfortable, bored, insecure (‘Should I be doing something? What will people think of me?’), disinvolved, and apathetic.

For the work that is available – ranging from making coffee for the break, to cleaning tool-sheds or other activities that can always be done
professionals expect collaborators to take the initiative, rather than give commands. But contrary to professionals’ well-intended emphasis on initiative, few initiatives are taken in the SWs, and collaborators just wait for the day to pass. The emphasis on initiative is one way in which the development of individual responsibility and autonomy are stimulated, and in which we can see how individualising and activating social policies find their ways into the everyday support practices of professionals.

Another way in which this becomes visible is in the many moments that were observed in which professionals prompt collaborators to focus on themselves and make explicit that they ‘are here for themselves, and not for others’:

The day after a meeting between clients and professionals at Gardens, two clients share their reflections with me. They tell me they only remember one thing from the meeting: that the professionals insisted that they [clients] should not be paying so much attention to each other [niet zoveel op elkaar letten en aandacht aan elkaar besteden].

Professionals at the SWs put a lot of effort into making collaborators understand that they are there ‘for themselves’, that they should keep to their individual business, and should not focus too much on other clients. On the one hand, they legitimise this emphasis by stating that interfering with each other could (and did at times) lead to chaos and potentially violent disagreements between collaborators. On the other hand, it is legitimised by the argument that if you want to develop, work on your personal goals, and grow towards independence, you need to do so alone. Working together with other collaborators, professionals, or the researcher is considered detrimental to the major goal of independence. Other people are more a hindrance than a help to one’s self-development in this logic. This corresponds to the idea of autonomous citizenship as opposed to relational citizenship (Pols, 2006). It is an active discouraging of ‘togetherness’ for the sake of being or becoming (more) employable.2

As a result of this often non-urgent and lonely character of the work, collaborators easily get the impression that it does not matter whether they are present at work or not. Co-workers regularly expressed a feeling of dispensability, like Timothy, who tells me that he comes here [Repair] so little ‘because there is no work’ [’omdat er niks te doen is’, literally: because there is nothing to do]. Like Timothy, collaborators do indeed regularly stay at home. And while many enjoyed the freedom to
stay at home when they did not feel like working, they also expressed the feeling that sitting at home quickly became boring and did not make them feel happy.

When collaborators do not show up, they are not sanctioned (at most they lose their daily remuneration of three euros), which stems from professionals’ well-intentioned aim of making these ‘leftover projects’ as welcoming as possible, in order to reach the even more difficult cases who are easily frightened by too-high demands. Professionals recognised that a disadvantage of this approach is that many collaborators feel dispensable.

Collaborators tend to take their work seriously when it is commissioned by somebody, when it has a sense of urgency, or when it is financially remunerated. In this sense, their perceptions of ‘meaningful’ work closely resemble policy ideas that define it as mainly market-oriented work. But situations of urgency are rare. Urgent tasks are defined as urgent precisely because of their embeddedness in a market-logic that demands a certain degree of quality and productivity. Therefore, SWs like Repair and Garden have little access to urgent work tasks. Many of the young men compared the SWs to a ‘children’s playground’. The few urgent work tasks that are available to SWs are most often carried out by a select group of collaborators or a few individuals who have particular skills (shown by a driving licence or a welding certificate).

In sum, engaging in socially recognised, urgent, or paid labour is very difficult. It is reserved for a few who can operate and function in a labour market based upon profit, production, and competition, or who can do so in SWs that are increasingly founded upon similar principles. By contrast, the majority of young men in this study experienced a lack of urgent work tasks, boredom, and being dispensable. We conclude that with such an institutional context and set-up of work projects, the chances that collaborators will experience apprentice-recognition are very limited.

However, recognition is achieved in other ways within the workplaces. In what follows, we introduce two observations that represent two major forms of empirically observed, alternative ‘recognition rituals’. We provide the reader with an ‘evocative ethnography’ (Skoggard & Waterston, 2015; Stoller, 2005) by meticulously describing two situations in terms of what the researcher saw, heard, sensed, and felt. In the spirit of Collins, special attention is devoted to bodies, to what kind of emotional mood is present, how and what kind of symbols, emotional energy, and solidarity are created.

Most importantly, we conclude that collaborators felt energised and that recognition emerged in and through interactions that respectively
related to acting rebelliously and streetwise (1) and working collectively (2). We found that rebel-recognition rituals are very prominent and argue that the institutional context provides ‘interaction rules’ that trigger these rituals.

Ritual 1. Bullying the outsider and rebel-recognition

Ron, Dave and I are sitting around one of the tables in the shed of Garden. We are chatting a bit and waiting for the time to pass by. There is not much work to be done. It is the summer holiday and only one professional, six collaborators and myself are present today. Ruben is sitting in the shed too and looks tired. He is sitting on a chair and puts his weight on the two back legs of the chair in order to lean against the wall. He rests his head and closes his eyes, with the plastic spoon he used to stir his coffee sticking out of his mouth.

Adriaan and Max walk into the shed. Ruben is half asleep by now, to the annoyance of his fellow collaborators. Gerard walks in a few times and mentions loudly that ‘at least we are working, we are doing real work,’ as opposed to the collaborators hanging around, and Ruben in particular who according to Gerrit ‘never does a thing.’ Gerrit walks out but seems to have given the lead for a bullying ritual to start, with Ruben as the dupe.

Max takes the container of powdered milk that is standing on the table; he holds it in the air above Ruben’s head whose eyes are still closed; and tilts it as if intending to sprinkle the powdered milk on his hair. In the meanwhile Adriaan, a fellow collaborator, walks in. Max’ action leads to laughter from him and the other young men in the shed. Dave bursts out in laughter and claps his hands. All eyes are turned towards Max and an unsuspecting Ruben. Ruben, still oblivious, opens his eyes and looks around with a surprised look, followed by even more laughter from his colleagues. Not struck by anything unusual - Max has pulled back and put the powdered milk container back on the table - Ruben closes his eyes and leans his head against the wall again.

All the others are still focused on him and seem to be wondering what Max will do next. Under their gaze and expectant smiles, Max now takes his lighter out of his pocket and holds it close to Ruben’s nose. He does not light it, but again acts as if he is planning to. Adriaan, who has physically moved close to where the action is happening, takes the powdered milk from the table. It all happens in a matter of seconds now: Max repeats the joke with the lighter for the second time, but this time really lights it and holds the flame close to the plastic spoon Ruben is holding in his mouth. When the flame hits the spoon and he feels the heat close to his mouth, Ruben gets a terrible fright. At the same time Adriaan pours powdered milk on Ruben’s head followed by Max giving him a final punch on the head. Dave and Ron are laughing while Max and Adriaan flee the scene together, their behaviour joyous and bursting with energy.
In the shed, several young men engage in this bullying IR. The closed, small space and bodily co-presence enable a mutual and shared focus (Ruben). The leading figures, Max and Adriaan, co-ordinate their bodily movements (holding the powdered milk or lighter near Ruben). They rhythmically take roles until they reach a peak moment, while the other collaborators watch and encourage them. They all come to share the excitement that breaks with the earlier atmosphere of boredom (shared laughter, clapping hands).

In terms of Collins’ IR theory, Ruben becomes a symbol, and by getting bullied, he becomes infused with all the values that the other young men want to distance themselves from. From observations and colleagues’ reports, we know that Ruben is seen as not hard-working, more ‘retarded’, needing more care, not possessing many ‘masculine’ traits and being too trusting of others. In the situation observed here, Ruben displays some of these traits: sitting in the shed, not working but falling asleep, he is easy (bullying) prey, reinforcing the image that other collaborators have of him. Ruben represents everything they do not want to be and against which they can reassert their own identity. Through menacing Ruben, they collectively come to value, reward, and reinforce making fun of others, asserting their dominance, witiness, daring and toughness (‘I don’t care if I hurt someone else’). The ritual serves to tie the collaborators together and to bring about feelings of solidarity (Collins, 2004, p. 151). However, this momentary solidarity is stratified, with Ruben as its victim. Max and Adriaan take the lead, Ron and Dave are secondary, while the researcher – the first author – is peripheral. In line with Collins’ theory, the researcher did not experience much of the group emotion.

Since Ruben is the central object and negative symbol, we qualify this as a bullying ritual. Recognition (for Max and Adriaan) stems from getting support for daring to hurt a colleague, not caring (or at least pretending not to care) about him, provoking, being witty and funny. This ritual produces what we could call ‘rebel-recognition’: recognition on the basis of not obeying and acting in opposition to what is deemed desirable in the workplace by professional and policy standards.

We contend that it is in a setting like this, where apprentice-recognition is promised but hard to realise, that rebellious recognition rituals thrive. The institutionalised interaction rules of autonomy, self-reliance, and excellence that were previously described incite young men to find alternative ways of being self-reliant ‘bosses’. Instead of excelling through work, they excel through being witty, funny, and having a big mouth. Instead of dominating others through work, they dominate
through bullying. Instead of being indispensable regarding the technical aspects of work, they make themselves indispensable in terms of the social aspects of the workplace.

Rebellious rituals create in- and outsiders and work at the expense of others. More severely disabled or less streetwise collaborators are made fun of as a way to feel better. They are ‘used’ as stepping-stones towards recognition. In this way, everyday practices of rebel-recognition operate within the same grammar of excellence, competition and individualism that underlies apprentice-recognition.

Ritual 2. Demolishing the greenhouse and colleague-recognition

Stretched out before us is a desolate field with an iron greenhouse structure that needs to be demolished. Without many explanations the collaborators, professionals and volunteers start working. Kevin positions the van in such a way that three of his fellow-collaborators can climb on top and reach the upper part of the greenhouse. They pull the big iron roof-pipes out of the base pipes that are planted in the ground. Every now and then the van needs to be moved in order for them to reach the highest section of the pipes. Kevin moves it by stepping hard on the gas.

While standing a few metres away I watch collaborators, professionals and volunteers working together. It seems that everybody has his own task. Some are more active than others, but all are focused on demolishing the greenhouse. The three collaborators on top of the car pull the roof-pipe using force and all at once, to get it out of the base pipe; they share the weight of the pipe, hold it, and carefully guide it from above their heads to their waistlines. They then pass the pipe down to their colleagues on the ground and hand it over to two of them. The two collaborators on the ground carry the pipe away and throw it on a pile further down the field. In the meantime, those standing on top of the van pull out the next roof-pipe and give it to two other collaborators on the ground. The cycle continues like this until all the roof-pipes are down. It strikes me that I can hear no complaints and that every collaborator is doing something. They try to take down the pipes by wriggling, pushing and pulling them back and forth rapidly. They pull and push again and again, as hard as they can. While doing so they make eye contact with one another, engage in complicit ways of looking at each other, grin and laugh together. It becomes clear to me that they are imitating having rough sex.

After a while I start helping the collaborators on the ground. I take turns with them to take the iron pipes that are being handed down by the collaborators on top of the van. At some point the team manager arrives. From a little distance away he compares the collaborators on top of the van to the monkey enclosure in the Zoo and laughs out loud. Alone. Most collaborators seem to have heard this but do not react to it, let alone join him in his laughter. The team manager
then takes his smartphone out of his pocket and walks further down the field. He wants to take pictures for a booklet of Carewell. A few collaborators revolt, and Kevin shouts ‘Don’t take photos we don’t want!’ The team manager does not listen and shoots a few pictures regardless of Kevin’s comment.

After a while the team manager starts complaining about how dangerous what they are doing is and that an iron pipe could easily fall on a collaborator’s head. The team manager is not being taken seriously, either by the professionals or by the collaborators, and they continue to work as they were doing before. When the work is nearly done, some collaborators start teasing/bullying the team manager. Ibrahim shovels earth and sand and throws it on the team manager’s trousers. Other collaborators who are standing around are laughing, urging Ibrahim to do it again.

In this observation, collaborators, professionals, and volunteers are physically assembled in the same place and through the same task. There is a shared focus on the heavy pipes, and workers on top of the van synchronise their movements. By wriggling out the pipes, lifting them and bringing them down, they become attuned to each other’s movements, and to the colleagues on the ground, to whom they carefully hand over the pipes. In this process, collaborators and professionals are focused on working together and become aware of their mutual focus. This generates a feeling of energy and action, observable among collaborators and in the researcher’s feelings. Full of energy, Kevin switches between sitting inside the van and moving it, and climbing on top of it to help pull out the pipes. The work ritual motivates everyone to take action and seems to create a feeling of confidence and self-esteem. In stark contrast to the usual boredom, everybody is active and no one complains. While the demolition of the greenhouse is not financially remunerated (because it has been commissioned by another CareWell project), the young men take the task seriously because it has been externally commissioned and has a sense of urgency.

In this situation, symbols of hard work, physical strength, and not being scared (of the pipes falling down) motivate the young men’s activities. Masculinity and references to sex (meaningful looks, joint laughter, repetition of (sexual) movements) strengthen the group feeling and raise the emotional energy. Through all these symbols, the young men form a group and distance themselves from the team manager (no attention, no response, shovelling earth on his trousers). He becomes the outsider who is disturbing the shared focus and shared mood. When, for example, Kevin steps hard on the gas to move the van, the team manager lifts his eyebrows as a sign of disapproval. He comments that the demolition is too dangerous and takes unwelcome pictures for a booklet of CareWell.
These are direct attacks on the symbols of hard work, masculinity, and fearlessness being upheld. The young men defend the group symbols and the solidarity that has temporarily been created against the ‘transgressor’ who could harm the image of the group (Collins, 2004, p. 49).

Even though it is work that is binding them together, their interactions do not fit the politically and organisationally intended, individualised apprentice-recognition. Instead, recognition arises here from group cohesion. Recognition arises from inclusion – everybody can participate according to his abilities – and from fulfilling a relatively easy but pressing task. Work and achievement are (not individualised but) collectivised. Collegiality and togetherness are more important than individual career-mobility or personal achievements. We call this form of recognition ‘colleague-recognition’: when young men are not recognised for their technical performances as apprentices but for their social performances as team-members or colleagues.

In contrast to rebel-recognition rituals, colleague-recognition rituals occur only sporadically. We suggest that the incessant focus of policy on the individual (who needs to become independent, self-reliant, and competitive), implemented by professionals, marginalises colleague-recognition rituals. The active discouragement or even prohibition of working together with other collaborators is intended to make collaborators work harder, be more productive and less distracted, serving the purpose of feeling recognised ‘as an apprentice’. But by prioritising the individual and letting collaborators focus on how they themselves can be(come) good employees, other ideals and practices are pushed aside. For example, it is no longer about how to work together, about finding out how to be a good group of employees, or about what they are here to do together. Colleague-recognition becomes scarce in such a context.

Discussion and conclusions

Rising demands for recognition are ubiquitous, including in policies for people with MID (Barnes & Mercer, 2005; CareWell, 2014b; Mogendorff, Tonkens, & Verplanke, 2012; Roets, Dean, & Bouverne-De Bie, 2016). But in the case of people with MID, recognition often fails, with a majority feeling excluded and stigmatised (Bigby & Wiesel, 2011; Butcher & Wilton, 2008; Hall, 2005). SWs are set up to counter and repair such negative experiences for the area of work. Recognition is intended to occur more smoothly and easily in places where fewer demands are made, their ‘differences’ are acknowledged and support is normal, but where they can still ‘participate’ through work (CareWell, 2016b).
In this paper, we used Collins’ theory of Interaction Ritual Chains (2004) to further develop a sociological interactive perspective on recognition regarding young men with MID (as a group that has trouble finding recognition in our society). Collins’ concepts, such as bodily co-presence and emotional energy, allowed us to highlight the interactional, physical, and collective aspects of recognition. This helped us to amplify and concretise what classical theorists such as Honneth and Fraser deem to be crucial for recognition, namely its intersubjective nature.

We found that young men with MID find themselves in a contradictory situation: recognition is meant to arise through work, but only a small percentage can live up to labour-market demands of productivity and competition. For the others, there is hardly any serious employment on offer, and they end up in sheltered work.

We hold that the opportunity for specific rituals and their content to arise is due to the political and organisational context of the SWs. We have focused on how work and welfare institutions produce a set of interaction rules that seep through and structure everyday IRs at the SW. Studying recognition by integrating IRs and (institutionalised) interaction rules has proved to be one way of combining Honneth’s focus on interactions with Fraser’s focus on institutions.

In the SWs we studied, individualising interaction rules privilege characteristics such as individual responsibility, autonomy, and excellence that are in line with the regular labour market. When successfully developed, such characteristics would enable a form of recognition that we called apprentice-recognition.

However, this type of recognition is mostly absent from the work scenarios in our study. The conditions of apprentice-recognition are not favourable to young men with MID, who do not excel in terms of individual planning, efficiency, specialisation, and perfection. Consequently, recognition based on one’s role and personal achievements as an apprentice is hard to achieve. In this situation, the young men live up to the individualising ideal through bullying and acting streetwise. They do experience recognition, but of a negative kind, at the expense of others. We termed this type of recognition rebel-recognition.

However, the rules and content of the institutional context do not determine all the interactions in these settings. We also observed the third type of recognition, which we termed colleague-recognition. In this type of recognition, collective work and group membership incidentally become the basis for recognition rituals. Even though this type was marginalised and regularly discouraged, we did observe it occasionally. The
predominance of rebel-recognition shows the potentially harmful consequences of promising something that cannot be fulfilled under the current institutional conditions.

As policy articulates an incessant focus on individuals and personal development, in which apprentice-recognition is favoured but hard to realise, our study suggests that professionals as well as young men themselves work around this focus and try to give shape to alternative rituals of recognition: rebel-recognition and incidentally colleague-recognition.

The first contribution of this paper lies in enriching a sociological perspective on recognition, by approaching recognition as a matter of IRs. We provide the second contribution by adding an institutional dimension to Collins’ situational theory and showing the ‘unintended consequences’ of policies that aim to strengthen recognition in ways that cannot be attained by those involved. This finding shows the importance of further developing a sociological perspective on recognition, in which recognition is studied as an interactive social process that can take different forms and that is fundamentally shaped by institutional settings. Such a sociological perspective can bring out more practical and nuanced accounts of recognition, and enrich both scholarly and policy debates on the issues concerned.

Notes

1. The Ethical Board of the Amsterdam Institute of Social Science Research (University of Amsterdam) decided that oral consent, properly introduced and obtained, is sufficient in this case. Formal ethical approval was obtained after carefully reflecting on issues such as privacy, power disparities, and the protection of data. Accordingly, all names used in this article (care organisation, SWs, and people) are pseudonyms.

2. While many professionals believed that developing social skills (how to deal with colleagues, with authority and so on) was more pressing for the young men for future labour-market success than developing technical skills, there are not many methodologies for facilitating social skills. By contrast, many methodologies do exist for enhancing the autonomy or personal control [eigen regie] of people with MID: for example, the Personal Initiative Method [Eigen Initiatief Methode], or Personal Strength Conferences [Eigen Kracht Conferenties].

Acknowledgements

The research on which this article is based was conducted as part of the Long-Term Care Partnership (Amsterdam, Netherlands). The authors gratefully acknowledge the partnership for its financial support of Melissa Sebrechts’ PhD research on Citizenship and People with Mild Intellectual Disabilities.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Evelien Tonkens  http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3958-1047

References


CareWell. (2010). Ondersteunen van mensen met een lichte verstandelijke beperking (LVV) en bijkomende problematiek [vision and policy document].


CareWell. (2016b). Leren door te doen [Brochure].


