

Recognition of Prior Learning in Health Care

From a Caring Ideology and Power, to
Communicative Action and Recognition

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*For my wife Johanna Sandberg
and our children
Loa and Mira*

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Linköping the 10th of September 2012

Fredrik Sandberg

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List of papers

This thesis is based on the following papers.

- Paper 1: Sandberg, F. (2010). Recognising health care assistants' prior learning through a caring ideology. *Vocations and Learning*, 3(2), 99-115
- Paper 2: Sandberg, F. (In press). A Habermasian analysis of a process of recognition of prior learning for health care assistants. *Adult Education Quarterly*, doi: 10.1177/0741713611415835
- Paper3: Sandberg, F. (Submitted). A reconstruction of the potential for critical learning and change in recognition of prior learning: A Habermasian analysis
- Paper 4: Sandberg, F & Kubiak, C. (Conditionally accepted). Recognition of prior learning, self-realisation and identity within Axel Honneth's theory of recognition. *Studies in Continuing Education*

1. Introduction

A common conception is that we learn not only within the formal educational system but also through work and during leisure. This learning is, however, not always made visible or, as is the focus of this thesis, recognised and assessed. In the last decade's recognition of learning, knowledge and experiences have become more important for society (e.g., Andersson & Harris 2006, Harris et.al 2011). In one sense, the lifelong learning paradigm now aims for the past, to the experiences, knowledge and learning that individuals have already acquired but that have not been acknowledged and made visible. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is now a worldwide movement (Spencer 2005) and an integrated part of discourses on lifelong learning, on policy level and practically amalgamated in several countries' national qualification frameworks. On a policy level, RPL is often considered positive and uncomplicated. From this perspective, RPL has been considered an important tool: society can save education time and consequently 're-tool' the workforce faster and with lower economic costs. At the same time, the individual can enter education for a shorter period and spend less money and time.

RPL could be a way to recognise and acknowledge that an individual's prior learning from work is worth something by formalising and documenting these experiences. However, this procedure can be viewed as instrumental, where prior experiences, knowledge and learning are transformed into something similar to money to 'buy' course credits or certificates. Experiences, knowledge and learning are then not used to enhance learning, but they are instead purified through

a reification or commodification process. Prior experiences, knowledge and learning are thus only worth something when they have been shaped into objects. This instrumentalisation can be linked to a more general global development where education is structured to appease the needs of knowledge economies and enhance economic growth. RPL also fits well with the idea of meritocracy, where the *outcome* of education is the focus rather than the importance of learning in its own respect. Simultaneously, recognising the learning, traits and abilities within lowly ranked professions such as health care work is important. RPL can raise the esteem of occupations that have long been neglected opportunities for training and development and where general societal recognition is absent. The picture is thus not intact. When approaching RPL as a researcher, even if the focus is on more instrumental forms such as accreditation, we must adopt a nuanced and reflexive gaze.

Swedish in-service training programs, such as those performed by health care assistants, have adopted RPL (Andersson & Fejes 2011). This thesis aims to analyse such an RPL process from a critical social theory perspective.

Aim of the study

RPL is an evolving research area. While RPL is developing in practice and policy worldwide, there is a need to understand the implications of RPL further. Recent literature on RPL has argued that research is lagging behind. Three research levels are put forward as important areas to analyse: individual students, RPL practices and institutional policies (Harris & Wihak 2011). Following these research levels, this thesis critically analyses one RPL practice where student's views of RPL have been the focus. This approach to researching RPL seems important to pursue, not least because most funded RPL research is policy-driven (*Ibid.*). Another problem concerning RPL research is the lack of more theoretical and critical analyses. More theorised approaches to RPL (Andersson & Harris 2006) are required for several reasons: i) RPL research

seems to linger behind contemporary developments in social and educational theory; ii) RPL has become a radical social movement for social justice, and a critique of RPL practice is a critique of this movement; and iii) there is a need for theorising that disturbs and questions the experiential learning discourse in RPL in a deep radical sense.

This thesis contributes to the limited theorisations by developing a critical social theory perspective on RPL. The thesis aims to problematize an RPL process for accreditation in the health care sector by reconstructing this process against and analyse it through communicative action and recognition theories. To meet this aim, Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action (1984; 1987) and Axel Honneth's recognition theory (1995; 2007) have been adopted as theoretical frameworks. General questions posed include the following: What are the power issues in the RPL process? What implications does the tension between the lifeworld of work and system of education have? What consequences do mutual understanding and communication have for the RPL process outcome? What part does recognition play for the participants? In four papers, these more general questions enable an analysis on RPL in this circumstance, focusing on such aspects as the i) relationship between the lifeworld of work and the system of education (Papers 1, 2 and 3); ii) issues of power inherent in the relationship between assessor and assessee (Papers 1 and 2); iii) the possibilities for critical learning and change in RPL (Paper 3) and iv) potentials of recognition in RPL for the participants to develop self-esteem, a positive relationship with themselves and the possibility of self-realisation (Paper 4).

This thesis has the following structure. The *second chapter* presents an overview of the context of RPL analysed in this thesis, RPL in the health care sector, RPL for accreditation and critical RPL perspectives. The *third chapter* introduces the theoretical perspectives adopted in this thesis. It begins by situating critical social theory historically in relation to the development of social philosophy. Following this, main

concepts in Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action and Axel Honneth's theory of recognition are outlined. Based on the concepts explained in chapter three and prior educational scholarly thoughts and research on Honneth and Habermas, the *fourth chapter* discusses the relationship among critical social theory, education, adult education and RPL. The *fifth chapter* discusses the field study conducted on RPL in the health care sector. It introduces critical ethnography, problematizes the observation and interview methods and introduces the concept of a virtual actor, a role in which a researcher can engage when collecting data on the field. This chapter then continues by explaining how the method of rational reconstruction inspired the critical social theory analysis of the RPL process. The chapter ends with a discussion of the need to be reflective or reflexive concerning the results. The *sixth chapter* summarises the papers on which this thesis builds. The *seventh chapter* presents a discussion of the results, conclusions and the implications they have for RPL research, practice and its connection to education and adult education. Some thoughts on future research are also considered.

2. Recognition of prior learning

There is little research on RPL, scholars are scattered around the globe and its research communities are often seen as ‘introverted’ and ‘introspective’ (Harris & Wihak 2011). During the last 15 years, however, RPL has become increasingly developed in practice and included in policy worldwide. Recent literature suggests the need for more research on RPL to understand this progression. This chapter aims to i) situate the study in the specific RPL context analysed in this thesis, ii) discuss research on RPL in the health care sector, iii) provide an understanding of the specific RPL method scrutinised, i.e., RPL for accreditation, and iv) position the thesis in the critical RPL research genre.

The context of the study

RPL has been defined as a practice that reviews, evaluates and acknowledges skills and knowledge that adults gain through experiential, formal or self-directed learning and formal education (Thomas 2000). Other definitions include RPL as a process that acknowledges and assesses informal experiential learning where prior formal education is not included in such a process (Spencer 2005). In Sweden, RPL has been defined as a process of structured assessment, evaluation, documentation and recognition of knowledge and competences, regardless of where they have been acquired (Ministry of Education 2003). Such general and various definitions do not immediately apply to all RPL contexts. In this thesis, an RPL process for accrediting prior experiential learning gained through work to qualify for course credits has been analysed critically. RPL is a

term that was coined in Australia and is used here and in South Africa. Different countries have used different concepts, including Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) in the USA, Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) and Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) in the UK, Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) in Canada; Sweden has adopted the concept of validation ('validering'), a term that has its origin in France.¹ This thesis adopts the RPL concept. Overall, the intention and benefits of RPL fluctuate between different countries and contexts. In general, the benefits can be summarised as focusing on i) enhancing social justice, ii) facilitating economic development and/or iii) making social change possible (Andersson et al 2003). While RPL for social justice focuses on the possibility for subordinated groups to access university studies, RPL for economic development focuses on using the competence in the labour market more efficiently. RPL for social change aims to make a population's knowledge visible and create better conditions for changing society. Though there are similarities of how RPL is implemented and used in different parts of the world, the purposes vary both among (Andersson et al. 2004) and within countries (e.g., Van Kleef 2011). It is thus important to examine and discuss the immediate context of the study analysed here.

In contrast to many countries where RPL first emerged in the higher education sector, the focus in Sweden, along with Australia and Canada, has been on the vocational sector, especially immigrants and employment issues. However, Sweden lacks a national vocational qualification framework, which differentiates it from several other countries, including the UK. In Sweden, RPL became known as Validation in 1996 (Andersson 2008) and was closely linked to adult education and learning. Between 1997 and 2002, adult education in Sweden went through a major reconstruction when the

¹ Validation is also a term used more generally in the EU (Harris 2011).

national adult education initiative was implemented. The state funded 100 000 study places (Andersson 2008). With this progression in adult education, RPL emerged and was implemented in practice. The focus during this period was, as in countries such as Australia and Canada, primarily to find ways to recognise immigrants' vocational competencies. The purpose was later broadened to include immigrants' and non-immigrants' vocational competencies and knowledge (Andersson 2006, Andersson et al. 2004, Van Kleef 2011, Cameron 2011). Sweden has produced two official reports (Ministry of Education 1998; 2001) on RPL, exploring its benefits for both society and the individual. In 2003 and 2007, a National Commission on Validation worked to develop RPL practice. Their final report was published in 2008 (National Commission on Validation 2008). The purpose was to develop a national RPL system. The report provided several suggestions of how to develop RPL in Sweden. The contemporary practice of RPL in Sweden focuses on capturing adult's knowledge and learning in ways and with means that are acceptable for educational credit and certification. This development of RPL can be seen in several countries. In Australia, recent policy on RPL has focused more on credit transfer and less on the learning opportunities that might originate from engaging in RPL (Cameron 2011).

To study RPL in the health care sector, an in-service education program in a semi-large city in Sweden has been accessed. The program aims to qualify health care assistants as licensed practical nurses using RPL and formal education. Fourteen health care assistants have participated in the in-service program. Most assistants work in the elderly care sector (elderly care homes and as home care workers), but some assistants work with mentally disabled children and chronically sick. The research undertaken in this thesis has focused on the RPL process, and the formal education that occurred after the RPL process has not been included here. The in-service program is at the upper-secondary level and takes approximately one and a half years to conclude. The

participants continue to work 80% of the time and spend the remaining 20% studying. This contrasts with the upper-secondary school program, which lasts 3 years (including core subjects), and the adult education health care program, which requires full participation for 1.5 years. The program is part of a national initiative, focusing on enhancing health care assistant competence, called ‘Step for Skills’² (Step for Skills 2006). SEK 1 billion was spent between 2005 and 2007. The purpose was to advise and support municipalities on matters such as workplace education, RPL and developing education directed towards future needs in the health care sector. (Fejes & Andersson 2009).

As proposed above, it is important to understand RPL in the context of its implementation. RPL is being used here as a method to facilitate health care assistants' transitions into licensed practical nurses. It is then a necessity to be aware of some characteristics of care work to fully appreciate RPL. Care work is one of the lowest paid jobs in the world and has been discussed as ‘the penalty of care work’ (England et al. 2002), i.e., caring for others is so important that it should come out of love and not out of making money (*Ibid.*). Cultural constructions thus place care workers on a pedestal, but their salaries are low and their societal status also remains low (England & Folbre 1999). Though this is the case, care workers are difficult to organise for collective action (Macdonald & Merrill 2002). This is connected to the assumption that care workers should work from their hearts, be unselfish and are put on a pedestal when presenting themselves with such characteristics. Conflicts or actions to gain in salary can thus be seen as a deviation from how care workers perceive themselves within these cultural constructions. Another feature in care work is that women mainly perform it. Care work is thus associated with women skills such as mothering, e.g., abilities often based on

² In Swedish, ‘Kompetensstegen’.

assumptions that are essentialist. One group within the care workforce is health care assistants. They are the 'frontline' workers responsible for the more practical work of cleaning, washing, dressing and preparing meals³. These workers regard the more caring and social aspects of their work as interesting and important. In its most formal sense, care work can be described as a job where one takes care of individuals who, according to prescribed norms, cannot care for themselves (Waerness 1983). Care work is also often characterised as emotional, and social work assignments are often described as meaningful (Ellström & Ekholm 2001). One feature of care workers is thus that they stress the personal and emotional sides of their job (de Jonge et al. 2008) that go beyond more formal skills. Caring practice is thus more than institutionalised care, and care workers also draw upon themselves in their everyday work with different clients. Caring practice is, for many workers, based on individual and personal experiences (Billett 2008), where health care workers' subjects are negotiated in work practice (Kubiak & Sandberg 2011).

Of importance here is also the specific context of elderly care, as the main focus of the in-service program is to develop the competencies of care workers within this field. In the 1990s, elderly care in several municipalities in Sweden adopted a purchaser-provider model, and elderly care became privatised and followed new public management (Fejes 2012). In line with the purchaser-provider model, training and further education was neglected and training for care workers became an individual project placed in the context of their daily work (*Ibid.*). With the risk of a huge shortage of health care workers in elderly care and higher demands for competencies (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs 2004; 2007), RPL emerged as a suitable and cheap model for up-grading health care assistants

³ Swedish health care assistants' tasks have recently increased to include medical assignments (Ellström et al. 2008).

to licensed practical nurses. Future needs and more advanced skills are generally emphasised. Health care assistants are often no longer seen as employable, and they are often required to have a degree as a licensed practical nurse (Fejes 2012).

Based on the context description, a summary is needed: i) RPL has progressed alongside a development in adult education and policy in Sweden and concentrated its attention on the vocational sector; ii) the personal and emotional underpinning of care work is put forward as meaningful, and characteristics such as working out of love put care workers on a pedestal, while the status of care work remain low; iii) the RPL progression in Sweden can be linked to economic development, new public management and the introduction of a purchaser-provider model; and iv) with the risk of a huge shortage of health care workers in elderly care and higher demands for competencies, RPL has emerged as a suitable and cheap model for up-grading health care assistants to licensed practical nurses. Within this context, this thesis focuses on analysing an RPL process to accredit health care assistants' prior experiential learning gained through work to qualify for course credits.

The history of RPL

Historically, RPL was somewhat developed in France in the 1930s, but the concept is more often traced back to 1945, when the American Council on Education (ACE) began to evaluate experiences of military personnel returning to the United States after World War II (Travers 2011). They (ACE) focused on college-level learning, and prior experiences from the military were used to determine how these experiences could be used for accreditation purposes and help make choices for how students could be placed appropriately within a general education programme (Travers 2011). Similar processes occurred in Australia at the same time and with equivalent purposes (Dymock & Billet 2010). The United States was the first country to introduce a formal RPL

concept, and the term Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) was introduced in the 1960s. However, it is possible to trace the use of RPL further back historically. In a Swedish context, identifying, assessing and documenting an individual's prior learning can be traced to the 17th century. During this time, the church used catechetical meetings to ensure that the population included good Lutherans (Andersson & Fejes 2010). Following the canon law of 1686, the master of the household was to teach his children and servants to understand the central principles of Christianity. If the priests' assessment of the family members proved that someone did not have the proper knowledge, they were in danger of being excluded from communion and were not permitted to get married (*Ibid.*). This historical example of using RPL certainly has its limitations. Even though, it can be an example of an assessment of an individual's informal learning. However, during this period such an assessment was used as a tool for social growth, instead of economic growth that seems to be the main focus of contemporary RPL practices (*Ibid.*). Other examples of using RPL can be traced to the guilds, as their work as apprentices was not finalised until they produced a piece, recognised as having the proper quality, thus proving that they mastered the craft (Andersson & Fejes 2007). The last could perhaps be compared to contemporary RPL practices within vocational education, where individuals are recognised against certain vocational qualifications.

Most contemporary RPL practices worldwide emerged during the 1990s, but the reasons and purposes for this were not always similar, although it is evident that the significance of economic aspects has increased. The next section provides an overview of research on RPL in the health care sector.

Recognition of prior learning in the health care sector

Although there are some discussions of RPL in nursing programs (Howard 1993, Murray 1994, Houston et al. 1997, Heath 2001, Scott 2007) and the health care sector in general (Fearfull 1997; 1998, Hartley 2000), there are few scientific research publications on processes of recognising health care assistants' prior learning. In England, research on RPL within nursing and health is increasing (Pokorny 2011), but the paraprofessional group, including health care assistants, remains absent.

In practice, RPL is developing much faster. Training for workers in the elderly care has recently increased in Sweden. In-service training programs have emerged on a national level, giving opportunities for individuals to receive proper qualifications. In the Swedish health care sector, and specifically within elderly care, there has been a lack of education and training. With a growing elderly population, a shortage of younger people choosing to become licensed practical nurses, where workers in the sector often lack proper qualifications, RPL has emerged and promised a solution to these difficulties (Fejes & Andersson 2009, Step for Skills 2006). RPL is here seen as a reward for both society and the individual by shortening education time to make both education and training less time consuming.

Some research in the context analysed here focuses on gender issues (Somerville 2006), learning in RPL (Fejes & Andersson 2009) and RPL and power (Fejes 2011, Hamer 2010). Somerville's (2006) study is one of few studies (see also Fejes & Andersson 2009) that can be contextually compared to the one analysed in this thesis, and it is thus given closer attention. She draws on a gender perspective when analysing vocational training for elderly care workers. RPL is used in this training program and she concludes that skills of great complexity were not recognised. Work in the elderly care sector is instead seen in essentialist terms as a natural part of being female. Somerville characterises the elderly care sector as a low-status and highly gender-segregated workplace, where

primarily women with low socioeconomic status work. Although referring to an Australian context, this description can be used to explain the elderly care context elsewhere, including Sweden. Drawing on the work of Skeggs (2001), Somerville discusses how a caring curriculum produces the caring self. The care workers participating in the education program find themselves to be intuitively caring. Somerville's study further argues that the RPL process only recognises experiences that fit the curriculum. Complex knowledge in care work thus slips through the cracks of the education system. She suggests that aged care has traditionally been characterised by a lack of education and training. Somerville's main conclusion is that complex skills necessary for care work were not taken seriously. Instead, she proposes that work in the elderly care sector was seen as essentialist, i.e., a natural part of being a woman.

Other studies in health care have focused on the connection between learning and RPL (Fejes & Andersson 2009). They conclude that RPL, integrated in more formal learning processes, can be seen as 'rpl', i.e., with lower case letters (Breier 2005). The main idea is not only to recognise prior learning but also to integrate it with more formal learning. RPL processes then not only recognise what has been learnt previously but also produce new learning. Reflecting on knowledge plays a major part, often occurring in learning conversations. More critical research is needed, not least because reflections, as promoted in learning conversations (Fejes & Andersson 2009), often disregard power relations, as several researchers claim (Michelson 1996, Hamer 2010; 2011) and is further addressed below.

RPL for accreditation

Although there are several variations within the RPL cluster, this study focuses on RPL for accreditation, a genre within RPL that has been the source of some significant and critical debates (Howard 1993, Murray 1994, Houston et.al 1995, Michelson 1996, Taylor 1996, Briton, Gereluk & Spencer

1998, Heath 2001, Spencer 2005, Wheelahan 2006, Scott 2007; 2010). It has been criticised for its instrumentalism and can be seen as interwoven with a more technical view of education, where means-end results, essential skills, and competency-based educational approaches have gained more attention (Gouthro 2009, Gouthro & Holloway 2010). Prior experiential learning in RPL for accreditation may turn into something similar to ‘money’ used in the education ‘market’ to buy course credits. When education becomes increasingly absorbed with credentials, there is a potential risk that learning moves to the periphery. In this more instrumental form of RPL, the course credit becomes the means-end goal of the process, and prior learning might not be used as a starting point for further learning or development.

For some researchers, tacit and experiential knowledge cannot, per se, be translated into course credits (Briton, Gereluk & Spencer 1998, Scott 2010) because prior experiential learning differs from the learning gained through studying a course (Spencer 2005) and the process of transferring knowledge from one context to another is challenging or even impossible. Education also provides ‘graduateness’⁴, something a student fails to realise if courses or programs are fully accredited (Wheelahan 2006). Education and qualification are thus more than the sum of their parts. Graduateness requires the capacity to connect between different experiences and ways of knowing and between tacit explicit, theoretical and practical understandings (Wheelahan 2006). One discussion has been whether RPL should focus on accreditation or access. In a higher education context, one argument is that access should focus on opening pathways for adults into higher education (Castle & Attwood 2001). RPL should here serve as support, but RPL for credit (or accreditation) could limit the opportunity to construct

⁴ Wheelahan writes in a higher education context, where graduateness has a different meaning than on an upper-secondary level.

knowledge and develop skills. RPL for accreditation is then viewed as an instrumental process to obtain freedom from taking courses and speed up the way to qualification. This could be a financial reward for the student who can complete a course in less time, but it also risks becoming a 'cut price' approach to education (Howard 1993). Following this argument, research has suggested that RPL (here APEL) processes that pass over parts of courses may lead to a significant loss of learning opportunities (Scott 2007). For some, RPL is generally problematic. RPL for accreditation, advanced standing or access are all seen as technical and mechanical processes that compress experience into a raw material, enabling a transformation into commodities and comparing or exchanging it for entrance, credit or advanced standing (Usher 1989).

RPL for accreditation could have consequences for education (Taylor 1996). RPL, in an age of 'mass higher education', could change universities' paths. Instead of providing courses, universities may have to handle employers working as stakeholders and students taking on the role as customers, shopping around for universities providing RPL (*Ibid.*). This may also be a concern when developing RPL for accreditation on other education levels, including the upper-secondary level in Sweden. Adults may choose not to study a course or program, instead requiring that their prior learning be exchanged for credit. However, this cynical critique should be nuanced, as RPL for accreditation is only one of several RPL approaches. Research on RPL integrated into course programs is another form that seems less technical and instrumental (Brown 2001; 2002). With portfolios, prior experiential learning can be integrated into course-based learning and add a further learning dimension. The focus is then not primarily on the course credit, RPL instead contributes to learning processes. Students would not miss out on opportunities for learning (Scott 2007) or fail to realise the gradueness (Wheelahan 2006) that is a result of engaging in education. However, 'soft' RPL developmental models have

also been subject to criticism, seen as distorting the individual's learning because it alienates the learner from the experience by objectifying such learning experiences (Butterworth 1992, Trowler 1996, Pokorny 2006).

RPL for credit or accreditation has undergone some harsh criticism. Words such as instrumental, technical, commodification, objectification and means-end focus are some of the connotations that RPL for accreditation can be associated with. These are not the only issues that have been the centre for criticism. Other critical perspectives have also closely considered the power issues in RPL.

Critical perspectives on RPL

As RPL highlights issues of experience and experiential learning, researchers in RPL have extensively focused on the experiential learning theory of Kolb (1984). Such theorisation suggests that learning is always a process and that this process always progresses by resolving conflicts and differences. A main thread is that experiences are the focus in any learning situation. Several researchers identify areas where students in RPL change positively in their self-knowledge, self-confidence, and affirmation of learning from experience, (Lamoreaux 2005), self-confidence and self-worth (Stevens 2010). Students in RPL have also been allowed to develop their abilities to reflect (Brown 2001). However, the linear nature of the RPL narrative may prevent students from explaining what they have learned (Stevens 2010). Though reflection is often seen as a positive aspect of RPL (Trowler 1996, Brown 2001; 2002), it also raises power issues. Reflection could result in the assessor's knowledge of the student's prior learning, rather than the student's prior learning per se (Hamer 2011, Michelson 2011). This raises critical issues. It has also been argued that the focus on experiential learning philosophies and methods has become hegemonic and is the only means by which RPL can be implemented (Harris 2006). This, which could be called 'Kolbianism', has emerged as problematic because it might monopolise the analysis and possibility of

interpreting RPL in other ways. Prior experiential learning could also in itself be problematic and may not always be positive for learning, as stated within the experiential learning paradigm (Brookfield 1998). It could actually destroy opportunities for transformation and learning (*Ibid.*), as prior experiences may restrict the possibility to reach new and other levels of understanding, if students do not critically reflect upon these experiences. These are not the only critical assumptions found in research on RPL. Though reflecting on prior experiences could be positive, there are other hazards.

Examples of the hazards and power issues in RPL have been discussed, drawing on poststructuralist theories (Andersson & Fejes 2005, Peters 2005, Andersson & Osman 2008, Fejes 2008; 2010; 2011, Fejes & Nicoll 2010). Drawing on Foucault, RPL procedures focusing on reflection can be viewed as a way to govern the nursing subject (Fejes 2008). One must be active in reflection, where the goal is to change one's behaviour. Reflection thus shapes subjects into what is a desirable care worker. Reflection is never neutral; it can instead be seen as a governing practice that always does something to subjectivity (*Ibid.*). Reflective practices invite subjects to reflect on what is desirable. Subjects are thus governed by their freedom to reflect. A way to further this discussion is applying the idea of confessional practices (Fejes 2011). Fejes identifies two forms of reflection in a study of health care assistants undertaking RPL: i) learning conversations can be viewed as focusing the subject on a public confession of what is desirable and ii) through a logbook, the subject is invited to make a public confession. If the first focuses on confessing to the other, the last focuses on a confession from the self to the self. Confessional and reflective RPL practices can thus be seen as disciplinary practices that shape subjects into what is desirable. Further, the education discourse may also disregard individuals who are not familiar with the language games in this context (Peters 2005). RPL processes may thus exclude individuals who do not speak the language used in such a process

(Andersson & Osman 2008). Even if assessors try to make reflections in RPL just and equal, some individuals may not have the tools to articulate themselves within the discourse of formal education.

Summary and discussion

Several RPL researchers draw attention to the need of more RPL theorisations (Harris et al. 2011, Andersson & Harris 2006). Both communication and recognition seem interesting themes to analyse in relation to RPL. Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action, further explored in the next chapter, can be used to critically analyse several issues raised in this overview, e.g., the importance of communication, power, identity and the educational system's formalisation of prior learning, experiences and knowledge. Prior research also suggests concerns that can be analysed using Honneth's recognition theory, including recognising prior learning gained through work as a possible way to esteem workers and allow self-realisation. This also resonates in research highlighting emancipation and transformation through RPL.

The next chapter explores critical social theory and key concepts in Habermas and Honneth's theories. The chapter aims to present a résumé of the interpretation developed for analysing RPL. How these theories connect to education, adult education and RPL is further explored in chapter 4.

3. Critical Social Theory

To understand the implementation of RPL in the health care sector, this thesis draws from critical social theory. Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action (1984, 1987) has been used to critically analyse RPL, as has the recognition theory of Axel Honneth (1995, 2007). This overview emphasises the theory of communicative action, but the discussion progresses from Honneth's critique of Habermas into the development of a recognition theory. To situate Habermas and Honneth within contemporary critical social theory and the purposes relevant here, there is a need for a short historical overview of the development of the Frankfurt school, critical social theory and social philosophy. The theory of communicative action and key concepts used in this thesis are then explored. After this, the chapter examines Honneth's recognition theory, its background and key concepts. Finally, the chapter is summarised.

The Frankfurt School, critical social theory and social philosophy

In the early 1930s, the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research was established under the direction of Max Horkheimer. During this time, there was still hope for historical-philosophical development, and the possibilities for emancipatory transformation were not yet doubted (Honneth 2007 p. 28). Ten years later, these views changed fundamentally. Forced into American exile by the situation in Germany and struggling with the emergence of a totalitarian whole in Hitler's fascism and Stalin's Stalinism, all hopes for positive progression and emancipatory transformation vanished. They were replaced by a cultural-critical pessimism

that was finally expressed in the famous dialectics of enlightenment (Adorno & Horkheimer 1972).

Habermas' theory of communicative action can be seen as a considerable break with the cynicism of this post-World War II period in critical theory. Habermas largely agrees with the concept of an instrumental rationality, finalised in Hitler's bureaucracy. However, Habermas also identifies a communicative rationality⁵ that offers positive resistance. By differentiating between system and lifeworld, there is a possibility for viewing the rationalisation of society as not only a systemic rationalisation but also as a rationalisation of the lifeworld. In modern societies, communicative action can be seen as a means by which the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld can be legitimately reproduced, a lifeworld that was certainly perishing in Hitler's and Stalin's totalitarian societies. A positive progression is thus identified by Habermas. Axel Honneth's quite recent discussions within critical social theory suggest that there is a need to focus on developing a recognition theory. Honneth argues that there is a strong need to re-evaluate critical theory in light of developed culturally pluralistic societies. Honneth accepts that the intersubjective communication found in Habermas is needed, but he suggests that the intersubjective recognition of validity claims in communicative action is not as core an issue as the intersubjective or mutual recognition of an individual's particularity. For Honneth, each individual's self-realisation in pluralistic contemporary societies is made possible by recognition in three spheres: love, rights and solidarity. Love and care in the family provide an individual with self-confidence, being legally recognised develops a sense of self-respect, and recognising a subject's unique contributions in processes of solidarity, e.g., through work (and education), develops self-esteem.

⁵ Habermas argues that Horkheimer and Adorno (1972), and Weber failed to recognise this communicative rationality.

It could be comfortable to place both Habermas and Honneth without further discussion in the Frankfurt School⁶ and consider them as members of critical theory. However, there are significant differences between contemporary critical *social* theory and its first development in Germany. Honneth argues that we should not label it as ‘critical theory’, but rather ‘critical social theory’ (or a critical theory of society). A critical social theory is then meant to focus on a normative critique that shares some elements with the early Frankfurt School. However, a contemporary critical social theory must be able to empirically identify experiences that can give a pre-theoretical indication, there is actually a basis for proposing normative arguments about subject’s social reality. Both Habermas and Honneth ground their discussions empirically, but not like a common social scientific researcher. Habermas’ work contains many references to empirical research in several subject areas, including linguistics, economics, anthropology, psychology and sociology (Brookfield 2005). Honneth also argues for empirical evidence that supports philosophical and normative claims (Smith 2009). He has been criticised, like Habermas (Pedersen 2009), for being too inconsistent on this matter. However, critical social theory progresses in two ways based on this discussion: by engaging its critics and to seek empirical evidence or rejection of its propositions.

Honneth and Habermas can be considered thinkers within critical social theory. However, they also fit within the social philosophy emerging in the thinking of Rousseau (Honneth 2007). Hobbes⁷ first develops this branch of

⁶ Both Honneth and Habermas have an ambivalent view of their own relationship to the Frankfurt school. As a symbolical example, Honneth’s office once belonged to Theodor Adorno, but Honneth replaced the old furniture (Anderson 2011). Habermas argues that it never was his intention to continue the tradition of the Frankfurt school (*Ibid.*).

⁷ Honneth refers to: Hobbes, T. (1997). *Leviathan*. New York: Norton.

philosophy, which was fully realised with Rousseau⁸. Social philosophy, starting with Rousseau, has a normative core in that it analyses pathologies that restrict humans to live a good life. For Rousseau, civilisation is partly a process where humans become reliant on “artificially constructed desires” (*Ibid.* p. 6) and lose the freedom they used to experience. There was a before when man lived in himself and only satisfied his natural needs. Rousseau’s critique is a critique not on social injustices, as with contemporary social philosophers, but on life in its entire form. It still considers that most social philosophers are normative in some sense. Starting with Rousseau, social philosophy continued through the works of Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Michel Foucault, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Hanna Arendt and progressed into contemporary thinkers such as Habermas and Honneth. Habermas’ contribution to the field of contemporary social philosophy is essential. The next part presents and develops his communicative action theory, focusing on its use as analytical framework in this thesis.

The theory of communicative action

What is called for, it might be argued, is an enlightened suspicion of enlightenment, a reasoned critique of western rationalism, a careful reckoning of the profits and losses entailed by progress. Today, once again, reason can be defended only by way of a critique of reason. (McCarthy 1984 p. vii-viii)

I here attempt to organise the theory of communicative action and systematically work through its main concepts⁹. However,

⁸ Honneth refers to Rousseau, J. (1992). *Discourse on the origin of inequality*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co.

⁹ A concept normally used when referring to Habermas in education is emancipation. It has been omitted here, though it is used in paper 1 to some extent. Such a concept plays a central role in critical social theory

the overview is limited to explaining the foundation for the theory of communicative action, as it is interpreted and used here¹⁰. Habermas is eclectic and reconstructs and uses many theories, so it is not possible to entirely overview these theories. Some of the influences have been addressed to show how the theory of communicative action is constructed.

Habermas' overall aims with the theory of communicative action are to i) develop a concept of rationality no longer tied or limited by the subjectivistic or individualistic premises of modern philosophy and social theory, ii) construct a two-world concept that integrates lifeworld and system and iii) against this background, sketch a critical social theory of modernity that analyses and accounts for its pathologies and suggests a redirection rather than abandonment of the enlightenment project (Habermas 1984).

This section begins by addressing the macro-level concepts of system and lifeworld. Communicative action is then examined, referring to key theoretical ideas such as the formal-world concept, actions, validity claims and rationalities.

and educational research. In Habermas' earlier work, especially that of knowledge human interest, emancipation also occupies a central position. This concept is no longer at the centre of the discussions in the two volumes that underpin the theory of communicative action. For several scholars in education and adult education, emancipation is central. A main reason for this seems to be that many consider Habermas' work to be epistemologically and ontologically coherent and it is thus possible to refer to the earlier Habermas (knowledge human interest) in one moment and Habermas' work emerging after the communicative turn in the next moment. This thesis adopts a less eclectic view of Habermas' work; some concepts are omitted or not emphasised, as they are not central in the theory of communicative action.

¹⁰ As Habermas has been used to analyse empirical data, this has influenced the theoretical overview of the theory of communicative action to explain key concepts used in this analysis.

System and lifeworld

Two important features in Habermas' theory of communicative action are system and lifeworld. To be able to understand the pathologies in modernity, there is a need to separate society into a system and lifeworld. Subsystems such as the economy and bureaucracies play major roles in an increasingly complex society. The main steering media for integration and reproduction in these systems are money (economy) and power (bureaucracies) (Habermas 1984; 1987). Money and power thus become key steering media for what is called instrumental rationality (discussed below). Habermas does not mean that bureaucratic and economic systems do not fill a function in society. The problem instead occurs when these systems move into the everyday life and social integrative contexts that require language for reproduction and, as explained below, colonises or assimilates the lifeworld.

It is not an easy task to capture the essence of the meaning of the Habermasian lifeworld.¹¹ It can be seen as developed on two levels. On the macro level, the lifeworld has three dimensions: culture, society and personality (e.g. Habermas 1998). On the communication level, the lifeworld is a horizon where communicative actions are 'always already' moving and can be limited and changed based on how society as a whole is structurally transformed (Habermas 1987). In Habermas' view, communicative actions occur with the lifeworld as horizon, but this horizon can shift; though the horizon is always present, it is only there for a concrete

¹¹ Theoretically, Habermas departs specifically from Husserl's and Schutz and Luckmann's writings on the lifeworld, but he also addresses Ludwig Wittgenstein's analysis of forms of life. Of importance is Husserl, E. (1978). *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology: an introduction to phenomenological philosophy*. Evanston: Northwestern U.P and Schutz, A & Luckmann, T. (1973). *The structures of the lifeworld*. Evanston: Northwestern U.P.

scene¹². The lifeworld is a reservoir of the things we take for granted, which are drawn upon in communicative action. Habermas argues that there is a need to move from a lifeworld described through Husserlian phenomenology (the ego lifeworld) towards a lifeworld that represent a culturally communicated and linguistically organised stock of interpretative patterns (Habermas 1987). The lifeworld then becomes a horizon that interconnects meaning. In everyday communication, no situations are thus totally unfamiliar. Situations we encounter are already known to us. The lifeworld is, as explained above, not easily accessed because it is already there and we never really think about it. Consequently, we never consciously refer to the lifeworld when communicating. This raises important issues in relation to Habermas' formal world concept (discussed below). The lifeworld can never be accessed or referred to in the same way that we can refer to something true in the objective world, normative right in the social world and sincere and truthful in the subjective world. As Habermas puts it:

Communicative actors are always moving within the horizon of their lifeworld; they cannot step outside of it. As interpreters, they themselves belong to the lifeworld, along with their speech acts, but they cannot refer to 'something in the lifeworld' in the same way as they can to facts, norms or experiences. The structures of the lifeworld lay down the forms of intersubjectivity of possible understanding (1987 p. 126).

The lifeworld becomes the semi-transcendental position where actors in communicative action can meet, but it always remains in the background. While the lifeworld is constitutive for mutual understanding, the formal world concept (i.e.,

¹² Lifeworld as this horizon departs from Husserl's idea of the horizon as an image that changes depending on an individual's position; the horizon can thus both become wider or shrink when moving through the "rough countryside" (Habermas 1987, p.122)

objective, social and subjective worlds) is a reference system that allows mutual understanding. Thus, “speakers and hearers come to an understanding from out of their common lifeworld about something in the objective, social or subjective worlds” (Habermas 1987 p. 126).

However, the lifeworld cannot only be explained culturally. The differentiation of the lifeworld could be seen as a separation of culture, society and personality in modernity, which Habermas consider to be the components that construct the lifeworld. Communicative action has the following results:

- I. Through mutual understanding, cultural knowledge is both transmitted and renewed;
- II. Through coordinating actions, social integration and solidarity is made possible; and
- III. Through socialisation, personal identities are formed.

The symbolic structure of the lifeworld is reproduced through

- I. Valid knowledge
- II. Stabilising of group solidarity and
- III. Socialisation of responsible actors

As discussed above, language has become the medium for understanding, coordinating actions and socialisation of individuals. Language thus serves as the medium in communicative action that enables cultural re-production, social integration and socialisation (Habermas, 1987) and reproduces the symbolic structures of the lifeworld.

Of importance in the theory of communicative action are the tension between system and lifeworld, the uncoupling of the system from the lifeworld and the risk of the system colonising the lifeworld. These issues require further consideration.

The uncoupling of system and lifeworld

The uncoupling of system and lifeworld is experienced in modern society as a particular kind of objectification: the social system definitively bursts out of the horizon of the lifeworld, escapes from the intuitive knowledge of everyday communicative practice, and [. . .] the more complex systems become, the more provincial lifeworlds become. In a differentiated social system the lifeworld seems to shrink to a subsystem (Habermas 1987 p.173).

Habermas understands the evolution of society as a process where the system and lifeworld are differentiated. In this progression, the system complexity grows as the lifeworld becomes increasingly rationalised (Habermas 1987). Habermas' overview of the system-theoretical sociology only uncovers one of three lifeworld components. While it considers society (or the institutional system), it omits culture and personality. This is not sufficient according to Habermas, and there is a need for a hermeneutical understanding of the pre-theoretical knowledge that members of society possess to analyse the lifeworld structures.

As the administrative and economic subsystems increase in complexity and act more self-regulated in modernity, it also disconnects from values and norms and is steered through the media of money and power. Habermas addresses these issues as follows:

Actors have always been able to sheer off from an orientation to mutual understanding, adopt a strategic attitude, and objectify normative contexts into something in the objective world, but in modern societies, economic and bureaucratic spheres emerge in which social relations are regulated via money and power. Norm-conformative attitudes and identity-forming social memberships are neither necessary nor possible in these spheres; they are made peripheral instead (Habermas 1987 p. 154).

When money and power take over the coordination, the system may strategically influence participants' decisions and bypass processes of mutual understanding and the lifeworld is no longer needed to coordinate actions: the lifeworld is thus technicized or mediatized through the steering media of money and/or power.

When communication becomes restricted in such contexts where mutual understanding is essential, and the media of money and power move to the fore as coordinating media, there is a risk of colonising the lifeworld. This is the centre of Habermas' criticism of modernity, and it requires further explanation.

The colonisation and assimilation of the lifeworld

In the end, systemic mechanisms suppress forms of social integration even in those areas where a consensus-dependent coordination of action cannot be replaced, that is, where the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld is at stake. In these areas, the mediatization of the lifeworld assumes the form of a colonization (Habermas 1987 p. 196).

Habermas primarily criticises when the system, through the steering media of money and power, moves into areas of society that need social integration to function. The system then threatens to replace the social actions that allow the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld to occur, thus obstructing the development of valid knowledge, social integration and socialisation.

Even if the system uncouples from the lifeworld, the major pathologies come to the fore when the system tries to regulate the social and lifeworld integrative contexts, through the steering media of money and power. The spawn of the lifeworld, i.e., the system created to maintain and support

humans in developing modern and complex societies, are about to destroy what first gave birth to it¹³.

As discussed above, it is not possible to refer directly to the lifeworld in communication. We must instead refer to something true in the objective world, normative right in the social world and sincere and truthful in the subjective world. The next section explores this formal-world concept.

The formal-world concept

Habermas argues that we should speak of three worlds, distinguished from the lifeworld discussed above¹⁴. The lifeworld forms a horizon of experiences in communicative action, which is reproduced when actors can relate to all three worlds using validity claims to approve or disapprove statements in a process of reaching mutual understanding. However, the lifeworld cannot be accessed, and the objective,

¹³ George Orwell's (1984) famous novel *nineteen eighty-four* and *Corpus delicti* by the contemporary author Juli Zeh (2010) are two references that could exemplify a lifeworld colonisation.

¹⁴ The formal-world concept is developed from Popper (1972). According to Popper, you can distinguish between three worlds or universes: (1) the world of physical objects or physical states, (2) the world of states of consciousness, or of mental states and (3) the world of objective contents of thought, i.e., scientific, poetic thought and works of art (Popper 1972 in Habermas 1984 p. 76). Habermas takes Poppers ideas as departures, to be able to discuss the connection between different worlds and what the worlds refer to in their different rationalities, validity claims and actions. However, Habermas soon concludes that Poppers' initial ideas are caught in the empiricist conception of the world/reality. A further step towards Habermas' view of the formal-world concept is progressed with I.C Jarvie, who starts from the phenomenological sociology of knowledge. Society is conceived as socially constructed. But, Habermas sees weaknesses in Jarvie's proposal, not least because it does not distinguish between cultural values and institutional embodiments of values in norms. Habermas argues that it is necessary to differentiate between values that have been institutionalised and contexts where cultural values move freely.

social and subjective worlds act as ‘entrances’ that allow the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld through communication.

In *the objective world*, an actor can develop intentions, through teleological or goal-oriented actions, to bring desired states of affairs into existence. An actor can make assertions that are either true or false and perform goal-directed interventions. This world relies on means-end rationality. In the objective world, there is only a relation between an actor and an objective world.

In *the social world*, we must keep two worlds in mind: the objective and social worlds. In addition to an objective world of states of affairs, there is a social world that is normatively regulated through interpersonal relationships. In the social world, we find that there are states of affairs related to the objective world as well as underlying social norms to which actors relate and conform. In the social world, actors act through interpersonal relationships and use the validity claim of normative rightness to approve or disapprove such claims. This world relies on a normative rationality.

The subjective world has a relation to the validity claim truthfulness or sincerity. It focuses on the subjective experiences of an actor to which he or she has privileged access. Habermas draws on the concept of dramaturgical action¹⁵. An actor brings something of his/her subjectivity to appear in front of a public. The three worlds can be summarised as follows:

1. The objective world: the totality of all entities about which true statements are possible;
2. The social world: totality of all legitimately regulated interpersonal relationships; and

¹⁵ Habermas refers to Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Doubleday

3. The subjective world: the totality of the experiences of the speaker to which he has privileged access.

These worlds could be seen as a kind of ontological base; they are the means upon which we can draw and refer to enabling the possibility of constructing claims that are true, normatively right and sincere and truthful. Each world is connected to a specific rationality, different forms of actions and validity claims. These are discussed below, starting with the connection between actions and worlds.

Actions

In Habermas' discussion of formal pragmatics, he generally distinguishes between actions oriented to success and mutual understanding. An agent who acts strategically can realise actions aiming for success, although actions towards mutual understanding cannot be forced but must be progressed rationally and intersubjectively (Habermas 1984). On a more particular level, which is the focus here, and in connection to the three worlds discussed above, Habermas identifies four forms of actions (1984 p. 87-109): Goal-oriented (or teleological), normatively regulated, dramaturgical and communicative actions.

Teleological actions have been at the heart of philosophical discussions of theory in action since Aristotle (Habermas 1984). Teleological actions occur between an actor and an objective world of states of affairs. An actor can form beliefs based on perception and, from this, develop intentions to fulfil his/her goals. The actor can bring into being expressions that fit or misfit, are true or false and perform goal-oriented actions that fail or succeed. This type of action model is used in game and decision theories in sociology, economics and social psychology.

Normatively regulated actions include one world in addition to the objective, i.e. the social. As well as referring to an objective world of states of affairs, actors here belong to a social world of interpersonal and normatively regulated

relationships. Actors interact through normative regulation. This is represented based on a relation between two worlds, i.e., i) true statements based on an objective world of states of affairs and ii) norms that exist and are seen as justified among actors. In normatively regulated action, participants can thus simultaneously adopt an objectified attitude towards something that is true or false or a norm-confirmative attitude to something normatively charged by approving or disapproving normative claims. Sociological role-theory discussions have influenced this action model (Habermas 1984).

Dramaturgical action is understood as a form of action where an actor performs in front of a visible public. This performance allows a subject to represent her/himself in a certain way by drawing on his/her subjective experiences to which this actor has specific access. Habermas also suggests that dramaturgical action has a relation to goal-oriented actions because an actor can control the style of actions to apply to this in their activities. According to Habermas, this action model is used in phenomenology, but it has not been developed into a sound theoretical approach¹⁶.

Communicative action refers to a form of action that pre-supposes two individuals capable of speech and action who form interpersonal relationships. These individuals focus on reaching mutual understanding about how to act in the situation and their plans for action so they can coordinate their actions through consensus. The central idea here is mutually negotiating a definition of a situation. Language thus has a central place in communicative action. This form of communication is central and is further discussed below.

As discussed here, Habermas' model acknowledges four action forms, each connecting to a specific world. But, it is not

¹⁶ I.e., when Habermas wrote it. Since then, further developments have probably occurred.

possible to act without raising claims that enable action. This is further explored below.

Validity claims

A discussion about Habermas' formal world-concept and different forms of actions has been outlined. The connection between worlds and actions should now also be apparent. The objective world has a relation to goal-oriented (teleological) actions, normatively regulated actions have a connection to both the social and objective worlds and dramaturgical action has a relation to the subjective world.

Habermas suggests that there are three validity claims¹⁷ that actors can raise in communication: truth, normative rightness and sincerity or truthfulness. A *truth claim* has a relation to the objective world and all entities about which true statements are possible. An actor here raises a claim that is believed to be true. A *claim to normative rightness* has a relation to the social world and all legitimately regulated interpersonal relationships. An actor here raises a claim thought to be normatively right. A *claim of sincerity or truthfulness* has a relation to the subjective world and all experiences to which the speaker has privileged access. An actor here raises a truthful and/or sincere subjective claim. As discussed above, these claims have a specific relation to each of the three worlds. Habermas summarises the relations between validity claims and worlds in the following manner. The relation is between an utterance (e.g., claim to truth, normative rightness or sincerity) and

1. the objective world (all entities about which true statements are possible);
2. the social world (all legitimately regulated interpersonal relations); and

¹⁷ Occasionally Habermas includes one more claim, a claim to comprehensibility or intelligibility.

3. the subjective world (the experiences to which the speaker has privileged access) (Habermas 1984 p. 100).

The relationship between worlds, actions and validity claims should now be clear. In the next section a more thorough discussion of the concept of rationality is discussed.

Rationalities

Habermas develops his theory on both the macro and micro levels. On a macro level, Habermas progresses a two-fold rationality concept. Habermas suggests that individuals have been able to orient their actions through mutual understanding, but he sees a problem in modern societies where the economic and bureaucratic spheres regulate social relations through money and power (Habermas 1987). Based on this, Habermas sees administrative and economic steering mechanisms as intruding into the lifeworld. Instrumental rationality is thus connected to logic in subsystems, e.g., the bureaucracy and economy¹⁸. In contrast to an instrumental rationality, Habermas suggests that a communicative rationality could provide resistance to the instrumental rationality, something that had been previously ignored. This form of rationality has its base in language and, as discussed above, could be seen as the means upon which the symbolically structured lifeworld can be reproduced (Habermas 1987).

¹⁸ Habermas first traces the concept of instrumental rationality to Max Weber. He understands Weber's suggestion that an instrumentalisation of the lifeworld is connected to modern society as whole and not to a specific class situation (Habermas 1987). Habermas' reading of western Marxism is thus based on Weber's reading of the same. The Instrumentalisation of society is here a general problem and concerns all. Weber as well as Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) identified an instrumental reason (rationality) but failed to recognise a communicative rationality according to Habermas.

On a micro level, Habermas identifies three forms of rationalities, bound to different worlds, actions and validity claims:

1. Goal-oriented actions in the objective world are underpinned by a purposive (means–end) rationality and claims to truth.
2. Normatively regulated actions in the social world are underpinned by a normative rationality and claims to normative rightness.
3. Dramaturgical actions in the subjective world are underpinned by an expressive rationality and claims of sincerity or truthfulness.

Different rationalities are thus connected to different worlds and actions: i) in the objective world, the rationale is to pursue success by acting goal-oriented, ii) in the social world, the rationale is to establish interpersonal relationships based on reaching understanding on what is normative right and iii) in the subjective world, the rationale is to present a truthful and sincere picture of the subjective world. If these rationalities are realised, one may speak of a communicative rationality that forms the base for communicative action. We thus move to the heart of the focus here: communicative action.

Communicative action

In communicative action participants pursue their plans cooperatively on the basis of a shared definition of the situation. If a shared definition of the situation has first to be negotiated, or if efforts to come to some agreement within the framework of a shared definitions fail, the attainment of consensus, which is normally a condition for pursuing goals, can itself become an end (Habermas 1987 p. 126).

Two aspects are crucial to understanding the concept of communicative action: i) The goal-oriented or teleological

aspect of carrying out one's plan of action and ii) interpreting a specific situation to enable reaching a mutual agreement. Communicative action must be performed cooperatively in a situation that has been defined in common. By doing this, there are two results or risks that actors try to avoid i) not coming to an understanding (i.e., misunderstanding or sometimes disagreement) and ii) failing to cooperatively carry out a plan for action. Mutual understanding and a common definition of a situation are here crucial if the process is to be performed through communicative action (Habermas 1987). In the above quote, it also seems plausible to distinguish between two levels of communicative action: one that aims to achieve goals through consensus and another where consensus becomes the end and where achieving goals has not been possible or, perhaps, where the end in itself does not require (collective) action.

In communicative action, actors can relate to all three worlds mentioned above. Using language as medium for reaching mutual understanding and a shared definition of the situation, actors raise validity claims based on the world to which the specific claim has a relation. In the process of reaching an understanding, an actor who wants to claim something is raising these validity claims to form an argument or using them to approve or disapprove a statement made by another actor. When validity claims are criticised, we enter into what Habermas calls discourse, i.e., a situation where actors critically and argumentatively try to reach a mutual definition of a situation through mutual critique of validity claims (Habermas 1984). Figure 1 below shows the following: i) a truth claim connects to the objective world, goal-oriented actions and works through a means-end rationality; ii) a speech act must also satisfy, through a claim to normative rightness, the norms of the social world or show that these norms are illegitimate (normative actions can thus be considered rational in a normative sense); and iii) dramaturgical actions through expressions in the subjective world must be sincere/truthful and can be seen as working

through an expressive rationality. Three rules must be followed in communicative action:

1. That the statements made are true (or the existential pre-suppositions of the propositional content mentioned are satisfied);
2. That the speech act is right with respect to the existing normative context (or the normative context that it should satisfy is itself legitimate); and
3. That the manifest intention of the speaker is meant as it is expressed (Habermas 1984 p. 99).

Figure 1. *The relation between worlds, validity claims, actions, rationalities and communicative action*

Actions	Goal-oriented	Normative	Dramaturgical	Communicative action
Worlds	Objective	Social	Subjective	Includes all worlds
Validity claims	Truth	Normative rightness	Sincerity/truthfulness	Includes all validity claims
Rationalities	Means-end	Normative	Expressive	Communicative rationality

Habermas proposes that accomplishing communicative action enables reproducing the symbolically structured lifeworld and, as discussed above, can have three more concrete outcomes:

- Through mutual understanding, cultural knowledge is both transmitted and renewed;
- Through coordinating actions, social integration and solidarity is made possible; and
- Through socialisation, personal identities are formed.

As also proposed above, the symbolic structure of the lifeworld is thus reproduced through valid knowledge, stabilisation of group solidarity and socialisation of responsible actors.

A failure to realise communicative action has consequences. First, it risks destroying possibilities to create legitimate and valid knowledge that have been reached through consensus. Second, it jeopardises the possibilities to form solidarity between groups. Third, it threatens the individual who, restricted to act strategically and goal-oriented, may not be able to develop a stable and secure identity. If earlier scholars within critical social theory referred to false consciousness, Habermas instead introduces the idea of fragmented consciousness to describe the consequences of distorted communication (Habermas 1987 p. 355). The consciousness of everyday is thus deprived of its ability to synthesise, and the individual consciousness becomes disjointed. This fragmentation stands in the way of enlightenment by reification and allows the system to colonise the lifeworld. The norms of communicative action are that actions should be oriented to mutual understanding (and thus validity claims) and not to pursuing individual goals strategically towards success. Communicative action requires speaking the truth, following norms that are legitimate or questioning such norms if they are seen as illegitimate. It is also necessary to be truthful and sincere.

This part has summarised the theory of communicative action and key concepts to make it useful to perform empirical analysis. Key concepts, including the formal-world concept, actions, validity claims, rationalities and system and lifeworld, have been examined and summarised for this purpose. Many of Habermas' thoughts are unfortunately impossible to explore here; a résumé in some form is necessary¹⁹. Some

¹⁹ For instance, Habermas draws on Austin's famous book, 'things to do with words'. Austin distinguishes between three acts: locutionary (acts that express states of affairs or perhaps truths), illocutionary (acts where an actor performs an action) and perlocutionary (acts where someone focuses on producing an effect on another person). It is possible to trace these acts to Habermas' idea of validity claims (Habermas 1984 pp. 288-289 presents a more coherent and in-depth discussion on this matter).

concepts are not brought up here because chapter 5 considers them. While the theory of communicative action has been the major influence for the analysis, the next section focuses on Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, used in paper 4.

From the theory of communicative action to Honneth's theory of recognition

(. . .) the critical perspective found in Habermas must be modified before it can be adopted for the purpose of making diagnoses of contemporary society. The focus of interest can no longer be the tension between system and lifeworld, but the social causes responsible for the systematic violation of the conditions of recognition. Critical social theory must shift its attention from the self-generated independence of systems to the damage and distortions of social relations of recognition (Honneth 2007 p. 72).

Habermas has been extensively criticised²⁰. One of the most influential debates can be seen in the postmodernity vs. modernity debate (Habermas 1981). One main critic of Habermas can be found in Lyotard (1984). He proposes that it is impossible to follow Habermas' search for legitimation in universal consensus based on argumentation. However, Habermas responds to his critics and dismisses postmodern and poststructuralistic thinkers as plain 'neo-conservatives' (Habermas 1981). A more contemporary critic is found in Mouffe (1999), who argues that it is impossible to establish consensus without exclusion and that Habermas is disguising power under the veil of rationality.

One critic is Habermas' former student Axel Honneth. A main conclusion of Honneth is that critical social theory has

²⁰ As one of the most prominent contemporary philosophers and by developing a *normative* critical social theory, Habermas has been prey for extensive criticism. Handling this criticism in-depth is neither relevant nor appropriate for the rationale of this thesis.

been generally stuck in a materialist tradition. Honneth proposes that “(. . .) as soon as the communication paradigm is grasped not in terms of a theory of language but of recognition, pathologies of recognition move to the centre of critical diagnosis” (2007 p. 74). Honneth is thus definitely not entirely dismissive towards Habermas’ communicative action theory. Communication and interaction is still at the centre of how mutual recognition is to be possible.

Through reconstructing (primarily) the works of young Friedrich Hegel and George Herbert Mead²¹, the framework for a recognition theory evolves. By focusing on Mead’s social psychology, Honneth argues that it is possible to construct a critical social theory with normative content. His idea is that social change and an individual’s self-realisation depend on a struggle for mutual recognition. Honneth argues that three forms of mutual or intersubjective recognition can be found, clearly in Hegel’s stage theory but also in Mead: “[. . .] the emotional concern familiar from relationships of love and friendship is distinguished from legal recognition and approval associated with solidarity as particular ways of recognition” (Honneth 1995 p. 94). In Scheler and later Plessner, building on Scheler’s social ontology, Honneth also finds a distinction between three spheres of mutual trust: “[. . .] primary bonds, commerce within society and the community of shared concerns” (*Ibid.* p. 94). Honneth thus argues that we can distinguish between social integration that occurs through emotional bonds, granting rights and a mutual orientation towards values. Honneth then attempts to explain mutual recognition as occurring in the three spheres or dimensions of love, rights and solidarity.

Love

Love is, according to Honneth, understood as emotional relationships among a small group of individuals, including

²¹ Honneth later rejected some influences of Mead (Heidegren 2009).

friends, lovers or between a parent and child. Though Mead does not focus on love, Hegel does. Love relationships can be characterised as a form of relationship where individuals are bound through neediness of each other. Recognition thus takes the form of emotional approval and can be considered, as proposed by Hegel, a “being oneself in another” (Honneth 1995 p. 96). By drawing on the psychoanalysis of David D. Winnicott, Honneth argues that a child and mother are first bound together through a primary intersubjectivity that gradually develops into a process where the child aggressively rebels against the mother. If the mother survives and resists the aggressive behaviour, the child can accept the mother as a separate entity that exists alongside the child and be able to love her. Honneth characterises this process, connecting to Hegel, as a form of a struggle for recognition. It is only by trying to destroy the mother “[. . .] that the child realizes that he or she is dependent on the loving care of an independently existing person with claims of her own” (*Ibid.* p. 100). In this process, the child, if the process is positive, can be alone without anxiety to develop an own personal life, as he trusts that the mother loves him even when the mother is not physically present. To develop ‘I’, an individual must experience being loved even when the other person is not physically there. Honneth concludes that “This fundamental level of confidence – not only in the experience of needs and feelings, but also in their expression – which the intersubjective experience of love helps to bring about, constitutes the psychological precondition for the development of all further attitudes of self-respect” (*Ibid.* p. 107).

While an individual can be recognised in love relationships, he can also experience disrespect by being violated or abused by friends and family (*Ibid.*). An individual’s positive relationship with himself thus risks being injured and restricts the freedom to act. The identity of a person can thus collapse, the confidence built up by love can be damaged and the ability to trust oneself and act can be lost.

Rights

In contrast to love, rights must be viewed as a legal recognition that develops historically. Law can be seen as a symbol of depersonalised social respect like feeling cared and loved for over distance. Both Mead and Hegel propose that we could not see ourselves as entitled to rights, if we are not aware of shared and normative responsibilities. For Mead, this is connected to being able to take the perspective of the generalised other. When individuals follow laws, they can make decisions about normatively charged issues. However, they must then be legally recognised as significant people. If an individual is expected to obey the law, he must also be involved in establishing this law. For Honneth, both Hegel and Mead propose that legal recognition is a continuing struggle for recognition. When subjects are disrespected, they confront and struggle for legal recognition. Honneth argues that “Just in the case of love, children acquire, via the continuous experience of ‘maternal’ care, the basic self-confidence to assert their needs in an unforced manner, adult subjects acquire, via the experience of legal recognition, the possibility of seeing their actions as the universally respected recognition of their own autonomy” (1995 p. 118). When a person is legally recognised, this person can develop self-respect, thus enabling each person in society to respect you. A person is morally and universally recognised as morally responsible if he has self-respect. This further allows participating in the discursive will formation of society as an autonomous person.

When a person is structurally excluded from legal rights, that person is not given the same level of moral responsibility as others in society. This may cause a loss in self-respect, as one is not considered to be an equal interaction partner in the will formation of society.

Solidarity

The third form of recognition, i.e., solidarity, is connected to a context such as work, where individuals mutually orient their goals to form a community. Mutual recognition of each other's unique contributions (e.g., personal abilities, skills and traits) to the common goal or project is thus made possible. For Honneth, both Hegel and Mead see this third form of recognition. Both consider this form of mutual recognition a place where an individual's traits and abilities are experienced positively. Labour or work (or education) could be such a context where individuals experience social worth because they realise society's goals. To feel valuable is to be recognised for having abilities that allow unique accomplishments that are invaluable for the common project. Within a specific group, people can attain a feeling of group pride or collectively shared honour. The practical relationship of the individual is thus connected to being part of a group that accomplishes things valuable for society in general. Thus, "solidarity" can be understood as an interactive relationship in which subjects sympathize with their various different ways of life because, among themselves, they esteem each other symmetrically" (Honneth 1995 p. 128). Being socially esteemed, a person can develop self-esteem because other members of society recognise the individual's achievements, traits and abilities as worthy.

When a person is disrespected by not gaining other's social approval, they are deprived of possibilities for self-realisation. When others do not see a person as someone who contributes with something unique, e.g., in the workplace, a person may not be able to build self-esteem and would fail to realise himself or herself, which could result in feelings of shame.

The social esteem that comes from being seen as a valuable subject must be viewed as a continuous struggle. When they feel disrespected, groups struggle to raise the value of their abilities, legal rights and possibilities for self-realisation. Struggling to be recognised is ultimately an

individual (or group) struggling to be cared for, and loved and seen as a unique person who is regarded as morally responsible to act.

A theory of recognition

Taken together, the forms of recognition – love, rights and esteem – constitute the social conditions under which human subjects can develop a positive attitude towards themselves. For it is only due to the cumulative acquisition of basic self-confidence, of self-respect, and of self-esteem – provided, one after another, by the experience of those three forms of recognition – that a person can come to see himself or herself, unconditionally, as both an autonomous and an individuated being and to identify with his or her goals and desires (1995 p. 169).

The question central for Honneth is how we as humans can realise ourselves and live a good life in contemporary pluralistic societies. To develop a practical and positive relationship with the self, crucial for self-realisation, there is a need to be recognised through i) love, to build self-confidence, ii) rights, to develop self-respect and iii) solidarity with others, to develop self-esteem. Recognition is not always a straightforward process; it is instead a struggle: a struggle for recognition. This struggle may start with individuals who may feel disrespected at work, which can be linked and developed into a group's collective struggles. Honneth's theory, or hypothesis, must be tested through research on each form of recognition. This matter is addressed in the following way:

This would first require studies on practices of socialization, familial forms and relations of friendship; secondly, on the content and application of positive law; and finally, on actual patterns of social esteem. With regard to this last dimension of recognition, and considering related research, we can claim with relative certainty that a person's social esteem is measured

largely according to what contributions he or she makes to society in the form of formally organized labour. (Honneth 2007 p. 75)

The last dimension holds the most importance here, and research on how worker's prior knowledge, learning and experiences are recognised shows potential for using and developing Honneth's theoretical claims. Hopefully, RPL research might be able to shine further light on recognition patterns to build self-esteem and how RPL could enhance the possibilities for an individual to realise him- or herself in the context of work.

Summary

This chapter summarised main concepts within the theory of communicative action and theory of recognition that are used in this thesis. The first section presented a comprehensive summary of Habermas' theory of communicative action. It tried to explain the relationship between lifeworld and system and explore how communicative action is constructed by exploring such concepts as the formal-world concept, actions, validity claims and rationalities. The next chapter explores the relationship among Habermas, Honneth, RPL, education and adult education.

4. Critical social theory and education

In this chapter Habermas and Honneth's theoretical frameworks are discussed in relation to education, adult education and RPL. Previous scholarly thoughts and research into these connections are combined with a more thorough analysis of the implications for a critical social theory analysis of education, adult education and RPL. Habermas occupies a central position in this chapter. His theory of communicative action has been the core theoretical approach used for the analysis in this thesis. Moreover, Habermas' work has been used frequently to analyse education. With Honneth, it is different. His recognition theory has started to appear in educational literature, but not to a large extent. Both Honneth and Habermas have been used almost insignificantly to analyse RPL, with the exception of some recent papers. This chapter has the following structure: i) prior research on education, adult education and RPL, drawing from the critical social theories of Habermas and Honneth, are discussed, and ii) implications for education and RPL are analysed using these critical social theories.

Communicative action and education

Educational research employing Habermas' thoughts can be traced to the beginning of the 1970s (Ewert 1991, Masschelein 1991, Mollenhauer 1968; 1972), and recent work reminds us that his work still inspires and is drawn upon by educational scholars (Englund 2007, Murphy & Fleming 2010, Moran & Murphy 2012, Fleming 2011). Most early discussions were found in the sociology of education. Habermas' influences were also seen in discussions of the role and function of educational institutions and societal practices. Educational

research focusing on Habermas has drawn on different periods of his intellectual career, including the early work of knowledge human interests (Habermas 1971), legitimation crisis (Habermas 1975), communicative action²² (Habermas 1984; 1987) and his more recent work on deliberative democracy (Habermas 1996). Another important viewpoint is that many scholars combine and align different periods in Habermasian thinking in an eclectic fashion (Welton 1995, Cooper 2010)²³. Though Habermas' work has been influential across several areas of education, there has been particular interest in adult education and learning (Murphy & Fleming 2010). Several scholars, including Welton (1995), Brookfield (2005), Mezirow (1981; 1985; 1997), Collins (1991) and Connelly (1996), have used Habermas when discussing the purposes of adult education and learning. Adult education and learning holds central importance here, as RPL is used to recognise adult's prior learning and experiences. As such, theories used to analyse adult educational practices have greatly influenced both RPL practice and research. In the next part of this chapter, we return to Habermas' influence on the theorisation of adult education and learning, but we first sketch a more general connection between Habermas and education.

Of relevance here and a focus of this overview is the link between the theory of communicative action (Habermas 1984; 1987) and education. Even early on, communicative action was the most frequently cited work (Ewert 1991), and

²² The second volume of the theory of communicative action was not published in its English translation until 1987, so many early discussions thus, for obvious reasons, did not include the full scope of communicative action. The uncoupling of system and lifeworld and the systems' colonisation of the lifeworld does not seem to be used explicitly in earlier educational research on Habermas.

²³ This eclectic use of Habermas is not completely stringent, as a result of Habermas' turn to language in developing the theory of communicative action. Earlier thoughts are thus not totally coherent with the theory of communicative action (e.g., Schäfer-Reese 1995)

enlightenment and emancipation were underlying themes that educational scholars used to debate educational issues (Ewert 1991)²⁴. However, other concepts are used as well. Researchers have argued that educational research can use Habermas' idea of discourse to focus on emancipation (Carr & Kemmis 1986), enabling a move from merely concentrating on posing questions to raise validity claims to actually transforming practice. Several academics refer to Habermas' idea of validity claims and the educational issues this concept raises (Baldwin 1987, Cherryholmes 1980, Mezirow 1985). Some scholars argue that questioning validity claims is an essential pedagogical tool in citizenship education. Several scholars in the 1970s and 1980s also highlight the importance of education as a place for constraint-free discourse (Bates 1982, Misgeld 1975) and how standardised education and control may prevent students from developing communicative competence (Baldwin 1987).

Of main importance here are the consequences that Habermas' communicative turn has for educational research. The overview by Ewert (1991) did not capture the entire scope of Habermas' theory of communicative action in educational literature. We here focus on the major break, i.e., the

²⁴ This was addressed in another footnote but needs further consideration. Emancipation does not occupy a central position in the theory of communicative action but does so in the earlier work of knowledge and human interests (1971). Habermas indeed views emancipation as crucial for critical social theory and, in an interview in the 1990s, states that he "cannot imagine any seriously critical social theory without an internal link to something like an emancipatory interest" (Habermas 1992a p. 193 in Brookfield 2005 p. 1133). Though emancipation is not explicitly addressed in the theory of communicative action, it could be seen as an outcome of communicative action. Brookfield's interpretation is that as much as reason is a species survival need, so is the desire for emancipation and "the calling into question, and deep-seated wish to throw off, relations which repress without necessity" (Habermas 1992a p. 194 in Brookfield 2005 p. 1133). Accomplishing communicative action could be seen as ways to achieve emancipation from the systems' colonisation of the lifeworld.

communicative turn, linguistic turn or the turn to language, that Habermas finally makes in the two volumes (Habermas 1984; 1987) underpinning the explanation of the theory of communicative action²⁵. Masschelein (1991) draws further attention to this ‘communicative turn’ and reflects more specifically on education as communicative action. Masschelein’s main argument is that earlier educational thoughts is caught in the tradition of the philosophy of consciousness and has not realised the implications of Habermas’ communicative turn (referring to Mollenhauer 1968; 1972).²⁶ Habermas’ turn makes intersubjectivity essential for subjectivity, and this places communication and language at the centre of interest. Actions in a pedagogical setting are merely possible by (echoing young Hegel) finding oneself with the other in a shared and common world, where interaction becomes the centre of education. This raises issues about pedagogical practice, not least because it suggests the importance of equality between the educator and students engaged in education as communication.

More contemporary Habermasian-inspired educational scholars focus on the relationship between education and deliberative democracy (Englund 2007), the concepts of system and lifeworld (Cooper 2010) and instrumental and

²⁵ Habermas developed the theory of communicative action throughout the 1970s, and several texts were published prior to the writing of the two volumes that came out in German in the end of the 1970s and its English translation in the 1980s (1984, 1987). Of importance to address is also that Habermas does not consider these volumes to be the final and definite result of his theory of communicative action. It has since progressed further (e.g., *Postmetaphysical thinking* 1992b).

²⁶ Masschelein writes in a German context and uses the thoughts of Mollenhauer (1968, 1972), who used Habermas to understand education. It is necessary to point out some problems with Masschelein’s arguments. Though Habermas’ work on the communicative action developed throughout the 1970s, it was not finalised until the end of the 1970s, so it might not be that strange that Mollenhauer did not fully realise the implications of Habermas’ communicative turn.

communicative rationalities (Murphy 2010, Han 2002). Within the first theme, learning democracy occupies a central position. As Habermas' work progressed and examined the concept of deliberative democracy, he also integrated more pragmatist thinkers such as John Dewey into his intellectual work, something that some researchers picked up early (Young 1990, Biesta 1995). The focus for many have also been to connect, compare, develop or criticise Habermas in connection to other scholars, e.g., the connections between Habermas and Donald Davidson (Roth 2009, Rönström 2011), Habermas and the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan (Moran and Murphy 2012) and Habermas and Erich Fromm (Fleming 2011). Several scholars have also developed Habermas' initial thoughts. Educational scholars have, for instance, used the work of Seyla Benhabib, one interpreter of Habermas (Englund 2007). It is not possible to go further into these or other scholar's thoughts on Habermas and education; the focus here has been predominantly limited to the connection between communicative action and education.

Habermas has been criticised and, as mentioned above, the postmodern critique has been evident. This critique has been questioned by arguing for a modernist project of education against the relativism of postmodern thought (Harkin 1998). The possibility for humans to communicate freely without being dominated should be the foundation of educational practice, rather than the postmodern fragmented (language) games. By departing from education as communicative action, language becomes the medium that focuses education onto cooperation and solidarity. Developing more interactive relationships between teachers and students and between students can thus be considered fundamental for education as communicative action and something that must be protected from the extreme relativism of postmodern thought (*Ibid.*).

This more general discussion of the connection between communicative action and education is also relevant for adult education and RPL. However, this relationship must be made

more explicit, starting by discussing adult education and communicative action.

Communicative action and adult education

This section is structured somewhat differently than the previous one. We here focus on three scholars utilising Habermas to understand and develop adult education: Stephen Brookfield, Jack Mezirow and Michael Welton. This part summarises these scholars' ideas of the connections among adult education, learning and Habermas.

For most researchers and scholars in adult education, Habermas' thoughts were introduced through the transformative learning theory of Jack Mezirow, who builds on the theory of communicative action (Mezirow 1981; 1997). A limited discussion of the connection between the theory of communicative action and the transformative learning theory is outlined here. Drawing from Habermas (1984), Mezirow 'plays' with key concepts (1997). He discusses the difference between instrumental and communicative learning, where instrumental learning progresses through empirical testing and communicative learning through at least two subjects, trying to reach a mutual understanding of something in the world. By engaging in discourse through communicative learning, adult learners can 'ideally' engage critically with intentions, values and feelings and beliefs. The validity claims discussed above are actualised here: What is true? What is normatively correct? Are expressive statements authentic and sincere? A key assumption within transformative theory is that adults learn by discussing their common experiences critically, ending with a common understanding. By engaging in critical discussions, adults can transform their frames of reference concerning beliefs, interpretations and habits of mind. In addition to critical and communicative learning with others, Mezirow suggests that self-reflection can enhance the possibility of personal transformation. Mezirow has, however, been criticised (Connelly 1996) for his interpretations of Habermas. Connelly argues that Mezirow i) is being too

individually and psychologically focused, ignoring the sociological, intersubjective premises of Habermas' work (e.g., system and lifeworld); ii) adopts a naïve and uncritical view of Habermas; iii) fails to address issues of power and iv) does not in general successfully engage critically with Habermasian theorisations.

Michael Welton (1995), another scholar drawing on Habermas, proposes that Habermas can help adult educators understand how to develop their teaching to account for ways for the student to develop identity and purpose. Welton thus considers it important to develop educational institutions that can create conditions for deliberation and emancipation that unfold possibilities for the student, focusing on developing cognitive, moral, technical and aesthetic senses. For Welton, the critical adult educator should maintain and focus on communicative action to defend the lifeworld from colonisation. It is thus possible to enlighten and empower different individuals, with different roles in society. By building on Habermas, Welton suggests a move from the andragogical paradigm of adult education and learning to a more critical and normative focus that emerges in Habermas' system and lifeworld model. For Welton, as proposed above, communicative action focuses the critical adult educator on preserving the lifeworld and defending it from colonisation. It is here, when the system and lifeworld uncouple, that the idea and need for an emancipatory practice of adult education emerge. Welton uses Habermas eclectically and switches between different periods of his thinking²⁷ to analyse adult education/learning.

Stephen Brookfield focuses on critical social theory and adult education and learning in several papers (Brookfield 1987; 2001; 2002; 2005), but he also progress one of the most extensive readings of original Habermas literature (Brookfield

²⁷ Welton switches between thoughts emerging from the early work of knowledge human interests and the theory of communicative action.

2005), connecting it to the purposes of adult education and learning. For Brookfield, Habermas' focus can help educational scholars centre on how adults can learn to reach higher levels of morality and invent a more fair democracy through adult education. Brookfield further interprets Habermas as not focusing so much on how adult learning is made possible, but instead on how learning is prevented from occurring. The steering media of money and power, through political and economic systems, exclude adult learning processes that may challenge status quo in these systems (Brookfield 2005). This may restrict adult education that focuses on emancipation, crucial for adult learning and education. In this form of adult education, actors must be able to realise their emancipatory interests by engaging in personal relationships with others; it is thus necessary to create political forms that are keen to guard this interest. Brookfield further progresses a more direct discussion about the relationship between adult learning and communicative action. Brookfield states that "child rearing, education, friendships, work relationships, community actions" (*Ibid.* p. 1151) are social functions that Habermas would say can only be fulfilled through communicative action. If adults were not learning, the problem would be that the communities in which they are engaged do not function as contexts where actors can reach mutual understanding or that there is generally a lack of such contexts. Adult education as communicative action would, according to Brookfield, be a process where it is not possible to decide who is supposed to learn from whom. Adult education as communicative action would focus on teaching, which is communicative and underpinned by dialogue, learning the symbolic structures of language (i.e., validity claims). Brookfield states that it is "[. . .] the possibility of adult's learning to speak to each other in honest and informed ways so that they can hold democratic conversations about important issues in a revived public sphere" (Brookfield 2005 p. 1154). Brookfield concludes that communicative action can

be seen as an ideal²⁸ that adult educators can use to measure their teaching and the learning focused.

As this overview suggests, there have been several discussions of the importance of Habermas' work in connection to adult education, not least Mezirow's use of Habermas in building the theory of transformative learning²⁹. The overview of the connection between communicative action, education in general and adult education is important for the discussions in this thesis. RPL research has not yet used communicative action to analyse RPL, except for some recent papers (Houlbrook 2011, Sandberg 2010; 2011, Sandberg & Andersson 2011).

Communicative action and RPL

Research drawing on Habermas to analyse RPL is insignificant. Concepts drawn from Habermas are suggested occasionally, but scholarly RPL analyses are rare³⁰. Houlbrook's (2011) recent paper is one of few examples and requires further attention (see also Sandberg 2010; 2011, Sandberg & Andersson 2011). Houlbrook uses Habermas, especially lifeworld and system, to analyse the experiences of

²⁸ Researchers have argued that Habermas has been misunderstood on this point and it was never his aim to discuss ideals or communicative action as a utopia (Carleheden 1996). Instead, an 'ideal speech situation' (a concept Habermas developed with Karl Otto Von Apel but later dismissed) could be understood as a normative fiction that is inherent in factual language and reality. It is thus not something metaphysical brought down from the heavens above, something, in the Hegelian sense, absolute (*Ibid.*). It is rather, what Habermas refers to as 'trancendens von innen' (Roughly translated: trancendens from within), according to Carleheden, or perhaps, but not totally coherent, communicative action could be seen as semi-transcendental. There are always some elements in communication that are identical (or perhaps universal); if not, communication would be empty.

²⁹ After reviewing papers in *Adult Education Quarterly*, one of the most influential journals within the field in North America, Mezirow's theory of transformational learning is clearly highly influential.

³⁰ Judy Harris mentions system and lifeworld in a footnote in a conference paper (Harris 1997).

students in social science and community services at the graduate level. One argument is that RPL for accreditation has three important aspects that are relevant for a discussion of RPL in the context of the community sector: i) formal knowledge is privileged over informal; ii) access risks have normalising effects and iii) there is dominant discourses that decide what is credentialed learning. He concludes that alternative RPL framings could enable resistance to a lifeworld colonisation. This alternative is argued to be a critical RPL model that can be viewed as an implicit act of solidarity with the lifeworld in which the learner exists. In a lifeworld-sustaining RPL model, Houlbrook argues for the need of being critical by engaging in mutual discussions. This raises issues about the engagements on behalf of the assessor in RPL. The assessor must understand the meaning and validity of the lifeworld that is captured in assessment. There is thus potential for RPL to maintain lifeworld meanings and resist hegemonic influences that reproduce power relationships. Based on such a model, there is a possibility for untraditional learners to benefit from RPL.

Honneth's recognition theory, education, adult education and RPL

If communicative action raises important issues in RPL about the tension between system and lifeworld, the possibility for communicative action or the risk of assimilation and colonisation, Honneth's theory is concerned with the prospect of recognition, self-realisation and the risks of misrecognition or non-recognition. RPL could potentially have a positive impact on lowly socially esteemed paraprofessional occupations, including health care work, by acknowledging the skills that those workers possess. For Honneth, work is a place for self-realisation, where the rank of the tasks performed through labour and how skills and traits are recognised is important.

Scholarly thoughts and literature connecting Habermas to education and adult education are more comprehensive

than their links to Honneth. Habermas' intellectual career stretches from the mid-1960s until the present day, while Honneth's work on the recognition theory did not emerge in substance until the 1990s (Honneth 1995)³¹. Huttunen and Heikkinen (2004) present one of the first attempts to link education to Honneth's recognition theory. At the centre of their discussions is the relationship between teacher and pupil. The teacher must balance critical feedback with a respectful and encouraging view of the student's accomplishments. When education is focused on the third form of recognition (self-esteem), it can strengthen the solidarity and enhance both students' and teachers' performances (*Ibid.*). Another example of the connection between learning and recognition can be found in Liveng (2010), examining how workers learn in health and care work (focusing on the elderly care sector). The results suggest the need for recognition as a prerequisite for learning, and Liveng underscores the specific importance of recognition in work that is lowly ranked. She further demonstrates the close connection among recognition, learning and development. She concludes that recognition can enhance an individual's self-esteem, but it can also raise the esteem of a certain group of professionals, something that holds specific importance and is desirable for workers in elderly care.

As noted above, educational research and scholarly thoughts within this context, i.e., connecting to Habermas, have a rather extensive history, while Honneth recently entered educational reasoning. The same occurs for connecting research on adult education. Nevertheless, some attempts have been progressed. Huttunen (2007, 2009) tries to interpret the link between Honneth's recognition theory and critical adult education, by referring to the political-philosophical debate

³¹ First published in Germany in 1992: Honneth, A. (1992). *Kampf um Anerkennung: zur moralischen Grammatik sozialer Konflikte*. (1. Aufl.) Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

between Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser (2003). Huttunen (2007) depart by connecting adult critical education and Freirean pedagogy (Freire 1972), where both redistribution and recognition are needed to emancipate individuals from economic and social repression. The debate centres on Honneth's critique of the materialist foundation in critical theory, a criticism of which he could see traces in Habermas. Fraser criticises Honneth for neglecting the re-distribution of resources and capital, putting recognition at the centre of the debate. Huttunen further identifies two orientations within critical adult education, i.e., the critical and cultural approaches. While the cultural focuses on the life-politics of everyday life, the critical focuses on the economic and structural levels of society. Huttunen concludes that, though Fraser's and Honneth's models contradict each other, both approaches are needed in critical adult education because adult education should work towards promoting both a formally just society and a decent one where an individual's self-realisation is made possible through recognition³².

As in Habermas' theory of communicative action, there are few examples of using Honneth's recognition theory to analyse RPL. Hamer (2011) has recently used Honneth to analyse RPL. Writing in an Australian context and focusing on the assessor-candidate relationship, Hamer argues that Honneth's theory of recognition highlights the ethical and moral perspectives on RPL relevant for social inclusion.

³² Though Huttunen eventually comes to this conclusion, there is a need for a more nuanced and less dichotomous view of the relationship between redistribution and recognition (i.e., that Fraser's and Honneth's views stand in contradiction). As Heidegren (2004) suggests, 'redistribution' or 'recognition' can be a misleading dichotomy. Heidegren indicates that Honneth indeed view conflicts of distribution, as struggles for recognition and Fraser does not oppose Honneth's argument, considering recognition the main concept for understanding contemporary struggles in society. Fraser argues that there is a need for perspectival dualism. In Honneth's later writings, he changes his view and includes redistribution as an important issue (Heidegren 2009).

Hamer summarises five potential ways of using Honneth to analyse this matter: i) mutual recognition is needed in enabling self-actualisation; ii) self-actualisation for all members of society is needed to secure social justice; iii) recognition must be intersubjective, i.e., both parties (in the assessor-candidate relationship) must recognise each other; iv) recognition is a relational process rather than a one-way acknowledgment by the assessor; and v) recognition can be attained both through institutions and personal relationships. Of particular importance is that RPL assessment processes recognise the 'who' of both the assessor and assessed, as it is necessary to take the normative perspective of the other to understand the other's particularity. Hamer (2010) thus argues that we need to move from a one-way normative judgment, where the assessor's normative view dominates to overcome ontological insecurity (Giddens 1991) on behalf of the assessed and epistemological authority (Michelson 1996) on part of the assessor. This recognition must be intersubjective (i.e., leading to mutual recognition and understanding). The assessor must know who the assessed is and recognise and understand the ontological context (practice of work and family) with which he or she is familiar. The assessor and assessed must therefore develop mutual understanding in the RPL assessment to be able to reach beyond processes where the assessor forces epistemological authority upon the assessed (Hamer 2011. Also see: Sandberg 2010; 2011).

Implications for education and RPL in the light of critical social theory

Though an overview of prior research shows some connections to the concepts developed in the theory of communicative action and its impact on education, it can be useful to outline a more unprecedented connection of the implications of critical social theory on education, adult education and RPL. This part emphasise the theory of communicative action, but the section that focuses on RPL the

implications of Honneth's recognition theory are also discussed.

Implications for education

Habermas himself rarely addresses learning and education, though he focuses on the broader social learning processes occurring in society (Murphy and Fleming 2010). It is possible to trace one coherent discussion on social learning processes in legitimation crises (Habermas 1975). Habermas takes up the notion of non-reflexive, reflexive and evolutionary learning. A critical analysis may propose that a context analysed is non-reflexive: “[. . .] non-reflexive learning occurs in action contexts in which implicitly raised theoretical and practical validity claims are naively taken for granted and accepted or rejected without discursive consideration” (Habermas 1975 p. 15). In contrast to contexts where reflexive learning is made possible, “Reflexive learning take place through discourses in which we thematise practical validity claims that have become problematic or have been rendered through institutionalized doubt and redeem or dismiss them on the basis of arguments” (*Ibid.* p. 15). Reflexive learning processes allow evolutionary learning, thus securing a legitimate reproduction of the lifeworld.

On education, in the second volume underpinning the theory of communicative action (1987), Habermas criticises some developments of the educational system. He discusses how “[. . .] the overbureaucratization of the educational system can be explained as a ‘misuse’ of the media of money and power” (Habermas 1987 pp. 293-294). When education is formalised through the power of bureaucracy and legal interventions, relationships between students and teacher and students in education also risk becoming formalised. Participants in education are thus forced to encounter each other as legal subjects with a formalised or objectified and success-oriented attitude, i.e., they are forced to act goal-oriented and (egoistically) strategic. One main conclusion that Habermas draws is that, as the lifeworld of the family in

late modernity has been formalised, we can witness a similar development in education (Habermas 1987.)³³. The problem is thus that education and the family must be able to work outside the legal system. Habermas argues the following:

Just as the socialization process in the family exists prior to and conditions legal norms, so too does the pedagogical process of teaching. These formative processes that takes place via communicative action, must be able to function independent of legal regulation [. . .] When judicial control and bureaucracy [Authors words] [. . .] do not merely supplement socially integrated contexts with legal institutions, but convert them over to the medium of law, then functional disturbances arise (1987 p. 369).

Educational bureaucratisation may require stronger administrative and juridical control, which not only complements reproducing education as lifeworld, but also tries to alter it (Habermas 1987). As such, the pedagogical freedom of the teacher (and thus the student) is threatened: he or she becomes a servant of the system, which is particularly problematic in lifeworld contexts that are the proviso for, and should exist prior to, legal norms. Habermas (*Ibid.*) continues on this matter: “the compulsion toward litigation-proof certainty of grades and the over-regulation of the curriculum lead to such phenomena as de-personalization, inhabitation of innovation, breakdown of responsibility, immobility and so forth” (*Ibid.* pp. 371-372). For Habermas, school and other areas like the family are spaces of life that depend on a social integrative consensus through both values and norms. These areas should be protected from becoming victims of economic and administrative subsystems. The judicial control of education could easily promote normative regulations that would limit

³³ Habermas refers to 'school' and not education here.

the possibility of critical discussions of what is normatively correct.

These thoughts require further interpretation and connections to the concepts used in the previous chapter. To begin, it is not difficult to conclude that when the steering media of power and money assume a dominant position in the educational system, there is a risk of a colonisation of the lifeworld of education. This is problematic because the social context reproducing education as lifeworld is at risk, jeopardising i) the reproduction of relevant and valid learning and cultural knowledge, ii) social integration and iii) socialisation, being replaced by an educational system where participants are forced to act egocentrically and in a competitive fashion, coxswained through the steering media of power and money. We might thus be left with a teleological focus on grades and tests and not so much learning in a social educational context. Education is then ontologically situated and reduced to that of an objective world, where goal-oriented actions of the individual, focusing on correctly answering the truth claims of the curricula, become the means-end goal of education. The social world of education and its focus on solidarity and critical discussions based on claims to normative rightness, and the subjective world examining personal identity work by both articulating and listening to expressive and subjective claims, might thus perish. Education may then be underpinned by an instrumental, not communicative, rationality. It is then 'enough' to be rational in means-end ways, excluding being rational in normative and expressive ways. This would exclude processes of i) rationally defining a situation in group work through a consensus and building solidarity and ii) excluding prior subjective experiences from being expressed and integrated into learning processes to develop personal identity. The possibility of acting in communicative rational ways would then be overthrown.

Habermas does show some interest in both learning and education. However, these discussions do not aim for

education or learning per se. Habermas' use of learning processes is much more general, and his discussions on education are peripheral and used primarily to exemplify his theory. The next section discusses the implications of critical social theory on adult education.

Implications for adult education

Several of Habermas' concepts developed in the theory of communicative action came to the fore in the overview of prior research on adult education and learning, and many concepts resonate in the discussions on Habermas and education in general. Because communicative action is about reaching mutual understanding to act, education and learning underpinned by communicative action have potential for changes or transformations, as Mezirow proposes, but mutual understanding would always be important, even in cases where collective action is not possible or preferable.

Focusing on communicative action in adult education could be a way to prevent the educational system from encroaching on the social integrative purposes of adult education and defend the lifeworld of (adult) education from colonisation. Brookfield, as mentioned previously, states that education has a social function that can only be fulfilled through communicative action. If adults were not learning, the problem would be that the communities or educational contexts in which they are engaged do not function as settings where actors can reach mutual understanding or that there is a lack of such contexts in general. Adult educators must then invite students to define learning situations mutually and encourage them to develop a communicative competence, not least learn how to question validity claims. Students have to learn that truth and normative claims are not fixed and that subjective prior experiences are important in arguing expressively and sincere for what is true or normative right – not least in adult education and learning where participants often have developed wide-ranging experiences. But, there is a need for being critical about subjective experiences and not get

caught in a naïve romantic view of prior experiences and learning (Brookfield 1998). Without a focus on critical discussions on prior experiences, there is a risk that the steering medium of money (which can be translated into a discussion of the function of grades in education) and power through political and bureaucratic systems colonise learning processes. Thus, the potential for challenging the system through adult education might be reduced to a minimum and adult education is caught in status quo.

Adult education as communicative action focuses on teaching that is communicative and underpinned by dialogue, learning the symbolic structures of language. Adult education is then a process striving for solidarity, enhancing the possibility of developing personal identities, and it could produce learning processes that create a reflexive and legitimate form of knowledge. Education and adult education have primarily been discussed in relation to communicative action. This is also important for discussing RPL, but closer attention to this connection is plausible.

Implications for RPL

Autonomous subsystems make their way into the lifeworld from the outside—like colonial masters coming into tribal society—and force a process of assimilation upon it. (Habermas 1987 p. 355)

Many issues raised in this chapter apply to RPL. When money and power move in to the lifeworld or social context of education, there is a risk for colonisation. RPL for accreditation is here interesting to discuss in relation to communicative action, as it is a process that, in its most concentrated sense, focuses on sidestepping the social integrative part of the educational system, i.e., learning. It instead focuses on the steering media of grades through assessment. RPL for accreditation could thus be seen as an example of bureaucratising education, where ‘assessment’ and

re-ordering prior experiences to fit curricula, becomes the means-end goals.

The theory of communicative action offers theoretical insights for analysing RPL, and several studies can be used to indicate the need for this type of scrutiny. We then return to some issues discussed in chapter 2. There is a risk that RPL distorts or fragments learning because it alienates the participant from the origin of the learning experience by trying to objectify it (Trowler 1996). Following this, RPL becomes a process that assimilates prior learning to fit it into the curricula or system of education. Experiences that do not fit into this objective frame are thus not recognised. It is important to apply the tension between system and lifeworld and the risk of the educational system colonising or assimilating the lifeworld of work in this analysis. This discussion becomes particularly important for the health care sector and in relation to RPL for paraprofessional workers, including health care assistants. These workers' knowledge relies on what, in Aristotelian words, could be called *phronesis* ('practical wisdom'), a form of tacit knowledge that does not easily fit into the curricula and instrumental credit transfer processes. Furthermore, RPL for accreditation could be seen as a process focusing on techniques and mechanisations that try to downgrade prior learning to a raw material, so it can be used for entrance, grades or qualifications (Usher 1989). It is thus not strange that RPL has been viewed as a highly bureaucratic and systematic procedure (Trowler 1996). Criticisms of RPL for credit transfer (or accreditation) have been, as discussed above, immense. Much of this criticism can be interpreted and critically discussed using the theory of communicative action. There is then, to repeat a previous argument, a risk that the educational system may colonise lifeworld-grounded prior learning.

However, this and other discussions primarily concentrate on the macro level of system and lifeworld. It is also important to find arguments for using the theory of communicative action on its micro level, which is primary

focus of this thesis. Several issues discussed in prior RPL research can be emphasised, including power issues (relation between assessor and assessed), assessment in general and communication. While being assessed in RPL, students should be able to understand the translation of their prior learning into course credits or qualification. However, this does not always seem to be the case. Research concludes that, though individuals may be more confident and content when given credit through assessment of their prior learning, their understanding of their competence might be the same as before the process (Butterworth 1992). They may not learn anything new from such a process, as their focus has been on the system's instrumental assessment of their prior learning. This draws attention to RPL, communication and mutual understanding. There is a problem when individuals in RPL are seen as objects that should provide the system with experiences through prior learning for accreditation, without understanding how these experiences are translated into credits.

It is also possible to draw conclusions in relation to Honneth's recognition theory and RPL. Although not straightforward, it could be meaningful to use recognition through rights to analyse RPL, as being recognised formally can be seen as a way for society to provide recognition to the undervalued and distinctive features of a particular group, e.g., health care assistants. However, this discussion must be transformed to fit the arguments in this context. For Honneth, law can be seen as a symbol of depersonalised social respect, and it is crucial to be able to see ourselves as entitled to rights. This is not possible if we are not aware of shared, mutual and normative responsibilities. When individuals follow laws or are granted titles through grades and certifications shared by a group that are considered legitimate, they are formally included in a community of shared values as morally responsible workers who recognise them as capable of making decisions about normatively charged issues. However, individuals must be recognised as significant persons, with a

title. Having a legitimate and proper job title would be a form of societal recognition that could bring a sense of self-respect and further moral obligations to fulfil the duties that follow the title. If the arguments here are accepted, becoming a licensed practical nurse should bring more social esteem than the title of a health care assistant.

It would also be appropriate to discuss Honneth's view on work and recognition. For Honneth, work is a place where the individual, through solidarity with others, can pursue recognition to develop self-esteem and pave the way for self-realisation. At the same time, some occupations are recognised as more worthy than others. Honneth's discussion of women's unpaid housework is important here. Child rearing and housework are not granted much social esteem, as male values determine work (Honneth 2007). Women with low wages perform care work; as such, it is often a work that has a low cultural rank. RPL processes can be seen as a way of handling this injustice to some extent, by recognising these workers' prior experiences, traits and abilities and, based on these, accredit them with proper titles. This could be viewed as a process based on recognition through both rights and solidarity.

Summary

An attempt has been made here to connect the concepts raised in the previous chapter to education, trace some original thoughts within Habermas and Honneth's work to education and draw some conclusions. Because Habermas scarcely connects communicative action to education, we also discussed previous research using Habermas to analyse education. It has been an attempt to discuss the connection among critical social theory, education, adult education and RPL. Following this overview, we now turn focus onto the methodological strand of this thesis.

5. Critical social theory in action

The results in this thesis build from a field study (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995) of an RPL process in the health care sector at the upper-secondary level in Sweden. A critical ethnography approach is applied, and Habermas' idea of a social researcher adapting to the role of a virtual actor holds certain significance in this thesis. In Habermas' work, it is also possible to trace a method: rational reconstruction, which inspired the present critical social theory analysis conducted on RPL. This chapter also discusses some key issues that arise when conducting a field study using different methods to collect data, including interviews and observations.

A Habermasian inspired critical ethnographical approach

In critical ethnographic research, Forester (2003) identifies a potential that has not yet been realised: using Habermas' theory of communicative action in critical ethnography. Philosophical debates on the epistemological concerns of doing this have restricted its potential and limited the possibility of performing such research projects. However, it has also been argued that we "should not hold sociological and ethnographic analysis hostage to their less imminent resolutions" (Forester 2003 p. 49 referring to Alvesson & Deetz 2000). Though it is possible to identify problems on a theoretical level, such problems should thus not restrict the effort to employ the theory of communicative action in empirical research. Fieldwork approached from a Habermasian perspective would allow a researcher to analyse the following (inspired by Forester 2003):

- The practical accomplishments of relations of power;
- How actors' claims to truth and truthfulness serve different and contingent variable ends;
- How normative claims are constructed in practice and how these claims form obligation, self (identity), consent, esteem and thus shape future actions;
- The actual communicative practices that, through beliefs, consensus, truth and attention, form relationships; and
- The micro-politics of speech and interaction

This helps understand ways to use the theory of communicative action in critical ethnographical-inspired research. As shown below, Habermas' method of rational reconstruction can inspire a critical social theory analysis that reconstructs empirical data against the norm of communicative action. This is also, to some extent, applicable when using Honneth's recognition theory. Methodologically, critical ethnography would be a proper way to describe the general approach adopted in this thesis. Although this is the case, most discussions below have been based on the theory of communicative action. In the next section, Habermas' idea of the researcher as a virtual participant (or perhaps actor) is explored.

Virtual participation

We learn quickly that we are not only listeners but speakers too, not only observers and readers or writers of texts, but actors as well. So we can appreciate the ways we must learn not only about interests but also about character, not only about utilities but also about identities, as these are expressed and articulated in everyday practice (Forester 2003 p. 63).

A researcher: [. . .] has to participate virtually in the interactions whose meaning he wants to understand, and if, further, this

participation means that he has implicitly to take a position on the validity claims that those immediately involved in communicative action connect with their utterances, then the social scientist will be able to link up his own concepts with the conceptual framework found in the context of action [. . .] (Habermas 1984 p. 120).

Forester has discovered something interesting while pursuing an understanding of how to use the theory of communicative action in critical ethnography. These thoughts can be further developed in connection to ideas proposed by Habermas. Habermas argues that a researcher must involve himself in the communicative structures to reach mutual understanding, without involving himself in the goal-oriented actions of the practice system analysed; he must become a *virtual participant*, or a researcher who

[...] participates in processes of reaching understanding and not for the sake of an end that requires coordinating the goal-oriented actions of those immediately involved. The action system in which the social scientist move as an actor lies on a different plane [...] the social scientist does not pursue any aims of his own within the observed context [i.e., act goal-oriented] [...] the social scientist has to participate virtually in the interactions whose meaning he wants to understand . . . (Habermas 1984 pp. 114-120).

In communicative action, discussed in chapter 3, Habermas distinguishes between three validity claims (i.e., truth, normative rightness and sincerity/truthfulness) that connect to three worlds (i.e., objective, social and subjective) (Habermas 1984). When a researcher becomes a virtual participant, he must engage with a performative attitude and take a virtual stand on validity claims raised in participatory observations or interviews. The main purpose of this is to reach mutual understanding with the participants in the research process. If an interviewee raises a truth claim or a claim to normative rightness that the researcher does not understand, the

interviewee may be asked to clarify his position. Similarly, if an interviewee subjectively engages to explain something truthfully, these expressions may become blurred for a researcher and he might have to ask for further explanations of the subject's experiences. These ideas were adopted in the field study. The focus here was to try to engage as a virtual actor and reach mutual understanding with the participants. A field study engaged in from a critical ethnographic perspective with the role of the virtual actor in mind is both helpful and challenging. It creates an opportunity to engage directly in situations where actions and communication occur to reach a more in-depth understanding. However, Habermas' abstract description does not fit perfectly when such ideas are put into practice, and it is important to be aware of the power issues. Though reaching mutual understanding with participants, the researcher analyses the data gathered and draws the final conclusions (see also the section below on self-reflection).

The role of the social scientific researcher has been explored using the concept of virtual participant/actor. This takes us into a description of the data that underpin the analysis in the thesis and the methods used to collect this data.

Methods

Observations and interviews have been used to collect data about the RPL process. In all, 25 interviews were conducted, providing approximately 30 hours of recordings. Fourteen participants were engaged in the in-service program, nine of whom were interviewed before the RPL process began. During the RPL process, two group interviews were performed, and 14 (i.e., all participants) in depth interviews were conducted after the process was completed. Observations were also used during the process, resulting in field notes and approximately 10 hours of recordings (appendix I).

Access to the field was given, and a representative of the organisation in charge of the RPL process and the researcher wrote and signed a contract. This contract reflected key ethical principles for conducting research in the social sciences,

including informed consent. All participants in the project were informed of their confidentiality during an introductory meeting, and this information was reiterated for each individual in the interviews.

The empirical data create the foundations for the analysis, discussion and results of the papers. However, only some of this empirical data are used to build arguments, theorise and analyse the results (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 1994). When analysing the data, the theory has been used as a sensing tool. It is not possible to fully present all empirical data, and it is probably not an ideal worth striving for either (Nordvall 2008). In the next section, I raise some issues that researchers face when using interviews and observations as methods, including that it is important to consider that the knowledge gained through interviews is bound contextually.

Interviews

Interviews are one of the most common ways of gathering qualitative data. Though this thesis used several methods, the 14 interviews conducted after the process ended were the main sources for the analysis in the four papers. The benefits of using interview data are numerous, but there is a need for a critical review of using the interview method.

This section focuses on the interview location, something that at first glance may be easily resolved. The setting or scene could have consequences for the outcome of the research and raise issues of power (Herzog 2005, Alvesson 2003, Vincent & Warren 2001). An interview must be discussed as a specific context, as it is not just two people sitting down for an ordinary conversation. Several things occur in this context: the participants try to avoid embarrassing situations, and the interviewee might try to produce a specific picture of himself or herself and the organisation or corporation for which they work (Alvesson 2003). The result of an interview must be seen as something that cannot be separated from its context. The answers given by an interviewee are closely connected to the specific situation in which these questions are asked. One such

example is that interviewees may change their behaviour for the interview and immediately change it back after the tape-recorder is turned off. After the interview, everyday talk may occur and the interviewee may feel free to make further remarks, sometimes in politically incorrect ways (Warren et al. 2003).

Issues raised here question, or at least emphasise, the knowledge gained in interviews. As researchers, we must ask ourselves what knowledge we as social scientists produce when using the interview to gather data. How close to the interviewee's lifeworld can we come in a phenomenological sense? What kind of mutual understandings, in a Habermasian sense, are or can be formed in interviews? The relationships among the researcher, interviewee and context are not uncomplicated. In this thesis, the interviews were conducted in the interviewee's workplaces, at the school where some parts of the RPL program occurred and during the participant's assessment in practice during RPL placements. The researcher met the respondents on their turf. These meetings greatly differed: a private room was booked on some occasions, but at other times, the interview occurred in open spaces where other workers were moving, sometimes interrupting the interview. In some cases, the interviewee would serve freshly brewed coffee and cakes, making the interview situation friendlier and less hostile (but probably more problematic when it came to the researcher-interviewee relation). Other times, the interview was more formal, at times even clinical. It is certainly difficult to handle such issues. A researcher must be able to adapt to different contexts and handle different individuals. One way such issues were handled was to enter each interview situation without preconceptions. Instead, the focus was to interpret the situation and adapt to the setting of each interview.

Two group interviews were conducted during the RPL process to take snapshots of the participants' views. There was a substantial difference between group and individual interviews. In the first case, some individuals talk, while others might be quiet. Some might be afraid of speaking frankly,

because of what others in the group might think, and others might dare to speak more freely when they are not alone with the interviewer. In the other case, the scenario might be the opposite: interviewees could speak more freely when no one else listens or be restricted because their colleagues are not there and the confidence of being in the group is lacking. There is a vast difference in dynamics.

These aspects must have affected the data to some extent. These facets raise important questions: What knowledge is gained through interviews? How does the interview context affect the knowledge gained? Though the answers to these questions are indeed problematic and difficult to discern, not least because the interview has a specific context, its distinctiveness may be too exaggerated (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995), especially in ethnographical inspired research where the interview is not the first and last setting where the researcher and interviewee meet and it is not the only source for gathering data.

This thesis emphasises interviews that strive for mutual understanding between interviewer and interviewee. It is then important to try to avoid seeing the subject merely as an object of phenomenological inquiry. There are some risks involved in the solitary reflection of a subject, because the subject in an act of self-reflection can deceive itself (Kember 2000). The subject must be split into a kind of internal intersubjectivity. The interview must therefore become more of a dialogue, building on the epistemological and ontological views adopted here. This could be accomplished in an 'idealistic' sense, if the researcher and interviewee make an effort to reach a shared definition of the situation (Smyth 2006). A Habermasian-inspired social scientist would engage a performative in contrast to an objective attitude and act virtually during interviews, taking part in a process of reaching mutual understanding (Habermas 1984). With this approach, the social scientist participates in the language processes that he wishes to understand and describe.

On a more practical level, when conducting qualitative interviews, tape recorders are often used to record spoken language (Kvale 1997). Most researchers then transcribe the recorded material into written language. The researcher here performed the transcriptions. The transcription process is important and can be seen as the beginning of interpretation and analysis. Transcribing the interviews thus gives the researcher a much closer relationship with the written text (Lapadat & Lindsay 1999).

The issues raised here are some of the problems that a researcher faces when collecting interview data. One conclusion is that we must be reflexive about findings. The end of this chapter presents a more elaborate discussion of this. Because the methodology adopted here draws inspiration from ethnography, several methods have been used, and the next part explores the observations in the study.

Observations

Though interview data were used primarily for the analysis in this thesis, the observations were crucial for developing the study and results, especially in the first paper, where an observation created the foundation for developing the concept of a caring ideology. In addition to using observations for analysis, the contributed knowledge, as stated above, was used to construct the interview guide. It was possible to clarify themes that were only partially developed during the observations, which could then be further advanced in the interviews.

There are various ways to use observations as a method. A researcher may choose to engage as a participant or bystander or move between several forms of observations (Patton 2002). The strategy here was to use participatory observations. During the first and to some extent second week of the RPL process, the students were engaged in school full-time; most observations (e.g., switching between onlooker and participant) were thus performed (Patton 2002). This was the most intense period; after this, the focus was less on

participative observations and more on being solely an onlooker in different parts of the process. The purpose, scope, length and setting limit the choice of observations that are made possible (Patton 2002). These aspects did impact the observations performed here. In some circumstances, it was not possible to participate in the activities of the RPL process because of the scope and purposes, as when observing different forms of assessment procedures. There was no additional time reserved to engage in the discussions as a researcher, and it was necessary to take the role of bystander. However, as argued above, the notes collected as a bystander was mobilised when construing guides for the interviews. Such notes do not have to be caught up in any kind of 'empiric cage', but questions that arose through spectator observation were brought back and used later in the study.

There is clearly a difference between being deeply involved as an inside participative observer and being an outside spectator (Patton 2002). From the 'inside', a researcher surely sees something differing from an 'outside' view. These are not the only relevant aspects here. As a middle-class white male observing female care workers and adult educators, several critical issues arise, especially when using a normative theoretical perspective, as is the case here. This arrangement could even be seen as elitist. However, being 'inside' can also be problematic if the researcher identifies too much with the context, because he might not be able to step outside the norms of the social world analysed. Conversely, being unfamiliar with the context observed, it might instead be difficult to engage as a researcher and it could take more time to become accepted. The last apply here, making it i) more difficult to access the field; ii) raise power issues; but on the other hand made it iii) possible to critically review the RPL process without being caught up in the norms and views of this particular practice.

It is not possible to indulge in a more in-depth discussion of the issues brought to the fore when collecting data using observations. Only some issues were addressed at this

juncture, and further matters would certainly be interesting to analyse further, especially the power issues, but also the boundaries between 'insider' and 'outsider'. However, the last issue echoes the idea of engaging as a virtual actor, discussed above. From the venture of clarifying the methodological approach used in this thesis to a discussion of the different methods used, we have now arrived at the means by which the analysis was conducted.

Rational reconstruction and communicative action

Though Habermas' theories have been deployed to a great extent in education and the social sciences in general, there are few examples of using his theory to analyse empirical data. His method of rational reconstruction has recently been put forward as useful but problematic (Pedersen 2008; 2009; 2011)³⁴. Habermas' method can be seen as an alternative to the approaches found in the empirical-analytical and hermeneutic traditions. It is located somewhere between the transcendental and empirical approaches. Historically, developing this method progresses as Habermas makes his famous turn to communication and language. It emerges as an alternative to the objectivistic and subjectivistic approaches and can be seen as a method that focuses on an analysis that is simultaneously theoretical, critical and non-relativistic. It aims to be descriptive and normative, as well as interpretative and explanatory.

³⁴ This does not mean that the idea of rational reconstruction has not been discussed or debated before. Pedersen (2011) refers to two generations of debates about rational reconstruction and provides several references. In the first generation, McCarthy, Thomas: (1978) *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas*. Cambridge. Polity Press; in the second generation, Pedersen mentions Honneth, Axel: (2009) *Reconstructive social criticism with a genealogical proviso: On the idea of critique in the Frankfurt School*. In Honneth, Axel: *Pathologies of reason. On the legacy of critical theory*. New York. Columbia University Press

A vast concern is that Habermas' method is developed to describe how his own theoretical work emerges. The theory of communicative action, in itself, is thus the result of using rational reconstruction to understand and analyse the conditions necessary for human communication to work and how mutual understanding through communication is made possible. Through a discussion of universal pragmatics, Habermas' work evolves into the concept of formal pragmatics in the theory of communicative action. The formal conditions for mutual understanding are addressed, not the substantial conditions. In communicative action Habermas, as discussed above, moves from a phenomenological focus on the solipsism of the subject to a subject acting through intersubjective communication, i.e., the subject as intersubjective.

In formal pragmatics or a reconstructive science, we learn to some extent in chapter 3 that Habermas distinguishes between actions oriented to individual success and those oriented to mutual understanding (and validity claims). A strategically acting agent can realise actions aiming for success; although actions aiming towards mutual understanding cannot be forced, these actions must progress rationally and intersubjectively (Habermas 1984). To reach mutual understanding, also proposed above, Habermas reconstructs three validity claims that can be raised (i.e., truth, normative rightness and sincerity) by referring to three worlds (i.e., objective, social and subjective). An agreement must be made concerning all three validity claims. When validity claims are problematised (e.g., when someone questions a truth claim), we move into discourse. Formal pragmatics can thus be used as a more general way to reconstruct or analyse data. Are actors oriented towards reaching mutual understanding with each other or do they pursue their own aims to reach individual success?

Though Habermas ultimately dismisses the idea of an ideal speech situation, Pedersen argues that it is possible to reach a fundamental “[. . .] symmetry between partners in discourse”

(Pedersen 2008 p. 470). This ideal situation must always be presupposed in communication, which assumes that communication is free and non-coercive. These aspects must be considered in a communicative action-oriented analysis. This primary condition, which is communicative action, could be parasitically demolished by lies and deceit. Against the norm of communicative action, it is thus possible to conduct a critical social theory analysis that uses communicative action to critically analyse the elements (e.g., strategic actions that are insincere, deceitful and untruthful) that try to parasitically destroy these ideal or normative conditions³⁵. These normative conditions can be further discussed in a less abstract way. To act communicatively is to (at least try to) tell the truth, act according to appropriate norms and be authentic and not manipulate others by presenting a false picture of the self (e.g., lie, act dishonest).

How can communicative action be used to analyse or rationally reconstruct empirical data (e.g., interview transcriptions, observations and field notes)? As discussed above, Habermas' use of the concept of 'empirical science' and traditional 'empirical analytical research' are different. Habermas has received much criticism, and the concepts he uses are not empirically specified³⁶. Pedersen argues that the hypotheses derived by Habermas are actually not empirical but are based on traditional philosophical methods, including critical literature explorations, concept analyses and more personal reflections. Though empirical examples are not entirely absent, concepts are often not satisfactorily presented

³⁵ Pedersen claims that these conditions can never be met in actual discourse, but they are instead an ideal or critical standard to be strived for (see also notes above).

³⁶ Although Habermas, almost absurdly, suddenly provides an 'empirical' example in the theory of communicative action vol. II (1987 121-122).

and clarified (Pedersen 2009)³⁷. Of even greater concern, according to Pedersen, is that [. . .] “the hypotheses arrived at through rational reconstruction are empirical hypotheses but cannot be tested by empirical means” (Pedersen 2009 p. 383)³⁸.

Pedersen continues by proposing a design of how to use Habermas’ method for empirical explorations. Fundamental for such a critical normative analysis would be to analyse how democratic a certain process is, using communicative action as a normative ideal. Pedersen suggests that communicative action is utopian and may not be fully realised in discourses analysed. It is still possible to identify what prevents this (semi-transcendental) norm from being fulfilled by exploring the means that parasitically undermine its ideal potential (e.g., lies, strategic actions and untruthful expressions). Empirical sources (or methodological attitudes) that may be used for reconstructions include document analysis, observations and interviews (Pedersen 2009)³⁹. In addition to analysing documents, Pedersen argues that engaging in observations of participants allows acquiring information and knowledge that can be used to construct interview guides, ideas adopted for this thesis. One remark is, however, that Pedersen’s proposal focuses on empirical investigations in political science; thus some of his discussions are not relevant here and have been

³⁷ Pedersen here refers to Skirbekk (although in Norwegian), who criticises Habermas on this point: Skirbekk, G. (2002). *Rasjonalitet–universell og pluralistisk?* In *Undringa*, edited by G. Skirbekk. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

³⁸ This last argument is devastating for the focus of this thesis. If the hypotheses of communicative action cannot be tested against empirical data, the approach adopted here would be an impossible endeavour. However, to repeat a previous argument, it also seems ‘unhelpful’ to “hold sociological and ethnographic inquiry hostage to their less imminent resolutions” (Forester 2003 p. 49 referring to Alvesson & Deetz 2000).

³⁹ When Habermas refers to empirical sources, he refers to books and works of art. However, he includes ‘documents’, and it could be interpreted to include interviews that have been transcribed into documents. This connection is however vague.

omitted. It was argued below that it is possible to go from a microanalysis based on empirical data (exploring a certain context as communicative action) to a more critical discussion of the relationship between lifeworld and system and the risk that the system may colonise the lifeworld.⁴⁰

It is also important to relate rational reconstruction to Honneth's recognition theory as used in paper 4. Iser (2008) discusses and compares rational reconstruction in both Habermas' and Honneth's works. He suggests that they i) share a left-Hegelian focus that assumes some kind of ideal intrinsic in social practices; ii) use constitutive ideals that can be reconstructed and used for critiques (communication oriented towards understanding in Habermas and undistorted conditions of recognition in Honneth); and iii) both elicit the idea of transcendence from within. This type of reconstructive social criticism can be used to critically appraise processes that do not realise the potential for communicative action (papers 1 and 2) and undistorted recognition (paper 4). This analysis also requires highlighting the resentment that individuals feel when they are systematically denied access to communication or being disrespected or misrecognised. Finally, such an analysis can try to reconstruct the more positive outcomes when processes are based on communicative action (paper 3) or recognition (paper 4).

It is important to highlight that Habermas' method greatly differs from the analysis performed in this thesis. The following section discusses the critical social theory analysis used to evaluate RPL more in-depth, and this method is only partly based on rational reconstruction.

⁴⁰ Pedersen does not consider one fundamental issue that Habermas raises, i.e., the uncoupling of system and lifeworld and the risk that the system may colonise the lifeworld. Thus, Pedersen's proposal, which is generally strong, seems a bit weak concerning the possibilities for using the theory of communicative action as a critical social theory. The colonisation of the lifeworld holds significant importance in Habermas' theory of communicative action.

A critical social theory analysis

In this thesis, the analysis has been influenced by rational reconstruction⁴¹, but the analysis should be considered to be a form of more general critical social theoretical analysis. It is vastly important to clarify that Habermas' use of rational reconstruction greatly differs from such an analysis. We now focus on trying to clarify how the four papers use the critical social theory analysis. Communicative action, and to some extent Honneth's recognition theory, are used as normative theoretical frameworks, and the RPL process is reconstructed against and analysed through these normative theories. Some key features of the theory of communicative action and its connection to how rational reconstruction has been used in this thesis are summarised below:

1. On a more general level, Habermas uses the concept of formal pragmatics: actions can either be oriented towards success or mutual understanding.
2. Communicative action comprises three forms of actions: goal-oriented, normatively regulated and dramaturgical actions.
3. Three validity claims can be identified: truth, normative rightness and sincerity/truthfulness. Each validity claim refers to a specific world: truth to the objective world, normative rightness to the social world and sincerity/truthfulness to the subjective world.
4. Communicative rationality depends on three rationalities: a means-end, a normative and an expressive.
5. The norm of communicative action is that the focus is on reaching mutual understanding (and not individual success); agreement among actors is reached on what is

⁴¹ One main difference between Pedersen's (2008; 2009; 2011) use of rational reconstruction and the focus on the theory of communicative action here is that he focuses on deliberative democracy.

true, normative right, and these agreements are based on truthfulness and sincerity.

6. Communicative action is semi-transcendental (although not a priori); though empirically derived, it may not be possible to actually find communicative action in an analysed discourse. It is, however, always potentially there. Communicative action is the norm on which rational reconstruction is based. What restricts communicative actions is thus parasitical. Lies, deceit, egocentrically reinforced strategic actions, goal-oriented actions and forced-upon norms are elements that communicative action as critical social theory tries to reveal and criticise.
7. From a critical and rational reconstruction based on communicative action as norm, it is possible to go to the system and lifeworld level and analyse the risk that the system may colonise or assimilate the lifeworld.
8. Finally, a rational reconstruction interpreted in this way can look for the consequences that different actions have on the outcome of a (learning) process. If mutual understanding is not reached, the consequences (e.g., misunderstanding, distortions or fragmentation) can be revealed and further analysed.

Before discussing how the rational reconstructive analysis where used in the papers, a description of the RPL processes focused in this analysis is needed.

In the RPL process, many methods were used to recognise and assess the participants' prior learning (see appendix 2). Two primary processes were selected for the analysis in the papers: the assessment interview and a 6-week RPL-placement. The assessment interview lasted approximately one hour. It was performed during the mapping period at the beginning of the process. In the assessment interview, one teacher asked questions while another teacher took minutes to document the participant's prior learning. The assessment interview included more open

questions, where the teachers asked the students to describe a day at work, and more specific questions drawn from the course curricula. The purpose was to make a first assessment of whether the student's prior learning was sufficient for a more extensive assessment compared to courses in the program.

The other process was a 6-week placement in which the participant's prior learning was evaluated in a practical setting. During the placement, the health care assistants worked under the supervision of a licensed practical nurse. In the RPL placement, the participants and tutors also engaged in discussions about the participants' prior learning. In some cases, these discussions lasted several hours each week, and a form with questions drawn from the health care program curriculum was completed based on these discussions. The teachers collected these forms, which were used as the basis for a 1- to 1.5-hour dialogue between each participant and his or her tutor and teacher. In this conversation, the participant was assessed based on the more practical content from the curricula of several courses within the health care program. The aims, analytical questions, data used for each paper and analysis processes in the four papers are summarised below.

Paper 1

Purpose: Critically scrutinise an RPL process using some aspects of Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action as analytical tools to develop the idea of a caring ideology.

Data used: Interviews, group interviews and observations

Analysis:

1. A pre-understanding in the study was that RPL had not been theorised critically to a great extent in current research. Habermas' theory of communicative action seemed to provide an interesting theoretical approach

for such an analysis of RPL.

2. An RPL process was identified and access to study this context was given.
3. Empirical investigations were performed in 2008 and 2009. The interviews were transcribed, and quotations used in the paper to illustrate the results were translated into English. Analysing the observation notes started before the final interviews were conducted. In this paper, some themes were first advanced based on the observation notes and were later further tackled and developed through the interview data.
4. A more thorough analysis of some themes that had emerged in the data was performed after the final interviews. During this analysis, the idea of a caring ideology emerged. Specific attention was paid to what actually constituted this caring ideology. Habermas provided conceptual tools (i.e., actions, validity claims, system and lifeworld) to deepen the understanding and more thoroughly explain the caring ideology in relation to the RPL process and the consequences such an ideology had for the outcome of the process.

Paper 2

Purpose: Explore RPL as communicative action, focusing on the student's understanding of this process and evaluate the results of the analysis against ideals in adult educational research

Data used: Observations and interviews

Analysis:

1. The assessment process was reconstructed, focusing

on the assessment interviews. The following questions were addressed.

- a. In what worlds does it progress?
 - b. What kinds of actions govern the process?
 - c. How can validity claims be used as a tool to inform the analysis?
 - d. How can Habermas's idea of rationalities be used?
2. The conclusions from the rational reconstruction developed into an analysis of the students' understanding of the process.
 3. A more thorough connection to the theory of communicative action was conducted in a discussion, also including a reconstruction of how the process would look like if it developed through communicative action norms.

Paper 3

Purpose: To examine the potential for critical learning and change in the RPL placement process by analysing this procedure using Habermas's theory of communicative action

Data used: Interviews

Analysis:

1. The interviews were analysed to reconstruct RPL according to the theory of communicative action.
2. Based on the viewpoints of the participants regarding the RPL placement, several interviews demonstrated potential for critical learning and change. Samples from the interviews with the participants were then

reconstructed in greater depth with a focus on how communicative action may be helpful to understand these processes. The following analytical questions were drawn from the theory of communicative action to analyse the potential for critical learning and change:

- a. Is the RPL placement based on mutual understanding between tutors and participants?
 - b. How do the actions of participants and tutors allow this process to progress?
 - c. What is revealed by focusing on validity claims in the communication processes between tutors and participants?
 - d. Is communication rational? Are tutors and participants reaching an agreement regarding their goals and norms of action and are they open to understanding each other's subjective perspectives?
3. The analysis concludes with a more thorough discussion focused on how communicative action could be used to further opportunities for critical learning and change in RPL for accreditation.

Paper 4

Purpose: The aim of this paper is to illuminate the significance of Axel Honneth's theory of recognition for understanding recognition of prior learning (RPL)

Data used: Three case studies were developed based on the data (e.g., observations, different interviews recorded observations). The case studies were built from a data subset focused on exploring paraprofessional learning in the UK (including biographical interviews, several follow-up interviews and critical incident interviews).

Analysis:

1. Common threads between the case studies were identified in relation to recognition.
2. Honneth's theory was used to analyse the particular dimensions of the participants' experience. During this step, the researchers identified themes in the data.
3. A model was developed through an iterative analysis, building on Honneth's ideas on intersubjective recognition and, to some extent, sociocultural perspectives on learning. This model was both a way to structure the data and a result of the analysis.

Adopting a normative theory to conduct an analysis on empirical data raises ethical issues. The next part suggests that it is necessary to adopt a reflective or perhaps reflexive attitude as a researcher engaged in such critical research.

The reflective relation to the self of the researcher

Being a researcher is mostly an individual occupation: though analyses and results are discussed with other members of the academic community, there is a need to adopt a reflective or perhaps reflexive attitude to the self of the interpreter. It is possible to distinguish a discussion in Habermas' work that can shed some light on these matters:

If ego makes this attitude of alter his own, that is to say, if he views himself through the eyes of an arguing opponent and considers how he will answer to his critique, he gains a reflective relation to himself. By internalizing the role of a participant in argumentation, ego becomes capable of self criticism [. . .] ego can take up a relation to himself by way of a critique of his own statement, his own action [. . .] (1984 pp. 74-75).

These thoughts can be useful if we consider it possible to reflectively view ourselves as researchers through the eyes of the interviewees and data. This would allow some self-

criticism of the results obtained. An argument for this would be that there are always 'real' people lurking behind the quotes used in the analysis and what these individuals say in response to questions in interviews and observations are what they say in this specific circumstance, using the knowledge they have at this specific place in time. These individuals do not know anything about critical social theory. Based on a specific ontological and epistemological view, a researcher generally analyses what interviewees say and re-orders their utterances into themes. The researcher creates a specific story. Another researcher would tell and interpret this story differently, depending on the chosen theory. In this thesis critical social theory is used to reconstruct this reality into a kind of normative idealistic (or semi-transcendental) reality, using concepts derived from ontological and epistemological positions. It is thus important to take up a relation to one's role as researcher and reflect upon the claims progressed in the analysis. In this thesis, paper 3 can, to some extent, be seen as a result of such a reflection. By engaging in self-reflection, it was possible to re-consider the RPL process, which had been the source of critical appraisal. Attention was then directed towards rationally reconstructing examples that, at least to some extent, echoed the norm of communicative action.

Summary

This chapter described the research approach, methodology and analysis method. Methodologically, this thesis was described as a field study inspired by critical ethnography. Habermas' idea of the researcher performing as a virtual actor was then discussed, furthering the idea of acting to reach mutual understanding without trespassing and making claims for the goal-oriented actions of the practice system researched. Interviews and observations were the key methods used here, and a more critical reflection of some issues facing a researcher adopting such methods was addressed. Habermas' method of rational reconstruction was explained, and the critical social

theoretical analysis drawn from this method was outlined. The chapter ended with a note on the importance of being reflective about findings when reconstructing empirical data against a normative theory. The next section presents an overview of the papers underpinning this thesis.

6. Summary of papers

Paper 1. Recognising health care assistants' prior learning through a caring ideology

This paper aimed to critically scrutinise the RPL process using some aspects of Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action as analytical tools to develop the idea of a caring ideology. The focus was the context of care work, the group of health care assistants and caring as a concept. Observations and interview data from the field study were used for the analysis. Drawing on the theory of communicative action, the following questions were used to explore this concept: What kind of actions can be revealed in the process? What is discovered in the RPL process when analysing it through the lens of validity claims? In what worlds does the process proceed?

The findings departed in an observation that occurred outside the research process in a network meeting in which the principal at the school where the study was being conducted participated. The meeting aimed to plan an RPL conference. The idea of conducting a joint presentation, introducing both the researchers' and teachers' perspectives, at the conference was discussed. However, the principal immediately turned down the idea, describing the teachers as fragile and unable to take criticism from a researcher. This was interpreted as showing that the principal adopted a caring attitude towards the teachers. One reason for making such an interpretation was based on the principal's idea that the teachers would not be able to take criticism. Another reason was that the principal excluded the teachers from making this judgment themselves, as if the teachers could not take care of themselves. This observation suggested that caring seemed

complex and intertwined with the structures of the education system in which the RPL process was being conducted. Based on this, the system seemed to follow a caring logic where the principal care for the teachers. And, as illustrated below, the teachers' care for the participants and the participants' work as health care assistants to a great extent involved caring for their clients. This quality is here called a caring ideology.

Three essentials distinguish the relationship between the teachers and health care assistants: i) the teachers' strategic actions of always acknowledging the participants, ii) the teachers' adoption of a caring attitude and iii) how these two aspects build a trusting relationship with the participants. The teachers acknowledge participants through personal and affective comments. This caring strategy has some consequences: i) it allowed the teachers to obtain power over truth claims, ii) it made mutual understanding superfluous and iii) it confused several participants. Though participants felt confused, they put their faith in the teachers' authority. It is further argued that this authority developed from the teachers' adoption of a caring ideology. The last theme of the findings addressed further consequences, especially the personal recognition the teachers gave the participants. This form of recognition seems to confirm the participants' personality and identity as health care assistants, i.e., who they are.

The main result is that the caring ideology adopted by the teachers risks reproducing a normative view of care work uncritically. What is true is not critically discussed; it is instead determined by the system. Because caring is seen in essentialist ways, complex skills seem to slip through the fingers of the system. The participants are acknowledged as doing health care work correctly, but what this truly means is never manifested or critically discussed. An important question here is thus whether RPL should only reproduce existing normative discourses of, in this case, of care work? Should RPL only re-tool the workforce or could it also have more emancipatory goals?

Using Habermas' theory of communicative action and

viewing RPL as a social practice, this paper concludes that the RPL process progresses through a caring ideology. This ideology is constructed through strategic actions. These actions are characterised as acknowledgements and performed with a caring attitude, aspects that become vital for building a trustful relationship with the participants. Through this ideology, the system strategically controls the RPL process by building the participant's faith in the teachers' authority. The teachers possess the validity claim of truth. This enables a strategic assimilation of experiences that fit into the curriculum as well as informal and uncritical acknowledgements of the participants' caring identity and personality. It is important to criticise that the caring ideology unreflectively reproduces a normative discourse in a highly gender segregated and subordinated job, performed by women with a low socioeconomic background. The RPL process also seems to neglect the complexity of caring. Instead, caring is viewed as something connected to the personality of the health care assistants, i.e., viewed in essentialist terms. The analysis concludes that a more reflexive, emancipatory and communicative RPL process could play a central role in developing and enlightening health care assistants, at least based on the results in this paper and the specific context of RPL discussed here.

Paper 2. A Habermasian analysis of a process of recognition of prior learning for health care assistants

This paper aimed to explore RPL as communicative action, focusing on the student's understanding of this process and evaluate the results of the analysis against ideals in adult educational research. The data were based primarily on interviews and observations. For the analysis, the following questions drawn from the theory of communicative action were used to explore the process: What consequences do certain actions have and how do these actions shape the RPL process and its outcome? How can the validity claims inform the process? How can the rationalities inform the process? Is

the communicative process rational? Methodologically, the analysis was inspired by Habermas' method of rational reconstruction.

Through a rational reconstruction of the assessment interview, it is suggested that it was based on the teacher's goal oriented and strategic actions, forcing the participants to act dramaturgically by digging into their subjective world. This process was then explored through the participant's perspective. First, it explored the student's understanding of the assessment interview through three subthemes: i) what is written down, ii) being blocked and iii) internal conversations. These themes showed that the participants were unsure about how their prior learning was documented and whether the teachers understood them correctly. Though the participants were unsure, they relied on the teacher's professionalism and never questioned this process. However, the lack of mutual definitions for the purpose of the assessment interview and mutual understanding during the interview resulted in a feeling of being blocked. This caused internal questioning in the participants: what is written down? What are the teachers looking for? When the participants were trying to answer the questions posed by the teachers, they were asking themselves this questions internally: how could they get anything out of the answers I gave them? From a Habermasian perspective, this reflected the teacher's goal-oriented and strategic actions. The lack of mutual definitions about the purpose of the assessment interview and the lack of mutual understanding during the interview seemed to have several consequences on the students' understanding of the process. First, the students did not know what the means-end goal of the assessment interview was (or what was true). Second, they did not know how to behave in relation to the prescribed norms in the assessment interview (claim of normative rightness). Because of this, the students were forced to conduct internal conversations. Instead of being a process based on communication between teachers and students, the assessment interview forced the students to 'talk to themselves.' Two

more broad themes were explored: i) the students' understanding of what was assessed and recognised and ii) 'to pass but don't know how and why'. In the first theme, the participants tended to either generalise what was recognised in the RPL process ('everything was recognised') or consider the recognition connected to them as persons. In the second theme, it was obvious that many participants did not know why they passed, how the assessment was conducted and what was actually recognised. One conclusion to draw from this is that the teachers did not explain how the participants' prior experiential learning was transformed into course credits. Participants thus tried to make their own interpretations.

These findings do not argue that the students' assessments were incorrect. However, the students i) did not understand how their experiences were linked with the curricula and ii) had difficulty understanding how their prior experiential learning was actually assessed.

The main results suggested that the process followed an instrumental rather than communicative rationality. Using Habermas' concept of rationality, it was argued that i) the students did not know by which means the assessment was conducted or what its goal was, ii) they did not know how to orient their actions towards the normatively prescribed values in the process (e.g., 'being a student', 'how to reflect in the right way so their prior learning can be made visible') and iii) they did not know how to present themselves truthfully, i.e., it was difficult for the students to be truthful or describe their subjective experiences when they did not clearly know what they were supposed to be truthful about. By reconstructing the process as a communicative action, the following were suggested. i) Students and teachers must agree on a mutual definition of the assessment process prior to its implementation. Here, the teachers must endorse a mutual definition of how the assessment is conducted and how the students should perform during the interview. What do the teachers want the students to accomplish? How are the student's supposed to act? What is the goal of the process?

However, the assessment interview process must also be more oriented towards mutual understanding. ii) The question–response focus must be changed towards a more conversation–focused interview. This would allow more communicative discussions, where feelings of being blocked and questions posed internally could be integrated into these discussions. Teachers in the RPL process must then more clearly inform students that anything may be said, questioned or discussed in the process. iii) A mutual conversation at the end of the process could include a thorough presentation and discussion of how the student’s prior learning is transformed into course credits. What prior experiences did the students have? How were these experiences assessed in terms of the curriculum? A more communicative action–oriented process could promote the students’ understanding of the process, and they could build on that as they move on to new learning contexts.

Though there may be suggestions about how to develop the RPL process into communicative action and mutual understanding, rather than strategic action, some problems are not that easy to solve. RPL for accrediting prior experiential learning to qualify for course credits can be seen as a process that forces the lifeworld to assimilate with the system. The present case argues that the ability to build on the recognised prior learning in a more conscious way is not possible. If RPL is to support adults’ learning, as discussed above, students must reach a mutual understanding with the teachers about the RPL process and its outcome, so they can move on and use these experiences in new learning contexts. A central issue to be discussed is thus how such a result of an RPL process promotes adult learning and education. The process seems to do little to i) breathe new life into the democratic social purposes of adult education and ii) promote a critical discussion of the participant’s prior learning and experiences. This becomes a dilemma, as adult education essentially promotes the idea that students must understand the experiences they have. Analysing the RPL process, especially in the relationship between teacher and participant, can raise

power issues and the processes do not seem to satisfy important goals and ideals in adult education and learning.

Paper 3. A reconstruction of the potential for critical learning and change in recognition of prior learning: A Habermasian analysis

This paper analyses an RPL placement process for accreditation to evaluate the prior workplace learning of health care assistants. The aim of the analysis in this paper is to examine the potential for critical learning and change in the RPL placement process by analysing this procedure using Habermas's theory of communicative action. Using a critical social theory analysis inspired by rational reconstruction, this study analyses interview data on the RPL processes with Habermas' theory of communicative action as a theoretical framework. The overarching question was as follows: What are the impediments and possibilities for critical learning and change in the context of the RPL placement? Interviews with participants were used for the analysis. Analytical questions drawn from theory included the following: Is the RPL-placement based on mutual understanding between tutor and participant? How do the participants' and tutors' actions allow this process to progress? What does focusing on validity claims in the communication processes between tutor and participant uncover? Is the process communicative rational? Have the involved tutors and participants reached an agreement about their goals and action norms and are they open to trying to understand each other's subjective perspective?

The findings were structured into three main themes (the two first themes also included subthemes): i) the potential for mutual understanding in RPL placements and the challenges in generating mutual understanding, ii) critical discussions and learning and iii) RPL placements as a potential source for action and change.

Within the first theme, one core feature of the RPL placement was the collegial interpersonal relationships that

many students developed with their tutors. Such dynamics were especially apparent among participants who had similar experiences and experienced similar work contexts. However, the students' and tutors' experiences were not always compatible, which hindered satisfying engagement in the RPL process.

Within the second theme, many participants made positive comments about the time spent at their placements and their collaboration and dialogue with their tutors. However, the data also suggested that the placement experience became a process of critical appraisal of several aspects of caring practice. From a Habermasian perspective, this process could be observed as occurring primarily within the normative dimension of care work, where the prescribed norms of caring practice are considered critically through discussions.

The findings also raised the question of the potential for action and change through RPL (theme 3). Three important factors facilitate change: i) most participants and tutors essentially share the same social lifeworld because of their involvement in caring practice, which makes it easier for them to develop strong communicative relationships and develop a shared perspective on their situation; ii) most processes focus on mutual understanding and cooperation, and language is the coordinating medium; and iii) if these two conditions are fulfilled, many tutors and participants can enter into critically discussions, e.g., about behaviours that violate prescribed norms and are therefore perceived as illegitimate.

The results indicate the importance of a mutual understanding of RPL among educational institutions, teachers and students. The pessimistic critiques of RPL for accreditation are not sufficiently helpful. Instead of merely rejecting this form of RPL, we should strive to create equilibrium between the lifeworld of work and the education system. The results presented here suggest that an RPL process could be developed that would focus on mutual understanding and critical discussion, thus enhancing social integration,

solidarity and developing a personal identity. RPL could thus legitimately encourage critical learning and promote change; instead of merely assimilating prior workplace-oriented learning by assigning grades based on work within the education system. Though this type of RPL model does appear to have potential, it must be further developed in the future.

Paper 4. Recognition of prior learning, self-realisation and identity within Axel Honneth's theory of recognition

The purpose of this paper is to illuminate the significance of Axel Honneth's theory of recognition for understanding RPL by analysing six case studies of the RPL experiences of paraprofessional workers in health and social care in England and Sweden. A model of varying conditions of identification and recognition was created for and used in the analysis. This model included four identificatory positions: i) self-realisation, ii) resistance, iii) marginalisation and iv) rejection. These positions were discussed in three themes: i) varied conditions of recognition – self-realisation and marginalisation, ii) varied conditions of identification – experiences of resistance and rejection; and iii) the fluidity and ambivalence of identificatory positions.

The first theme argued that the identificatory position of self-realisation involves a co-occurrence of recognition and identification. The workplace is an important place for recognition because it is a context where the social esteem of individual achievements and abilities develops. It is also a site within which people construct and sustain their identities. RPL appeared to play a role in self-realisation. Possessing the qualification or successfully completing aspects of it was a matter of personal identification, not least because years of experience and skills were made visible and recognised. This recognition was not simply local, but it occurred within a system of accreditation according to national standards. Participating in RPL also provoked an enhanced understanding, a kind of sense of self-recognition, as participants developed greater awareness of the knowledge

and skills they do possess or realised the theoretical underpinnings of their work. The RPL process could create opportunities for an individual to develop a connection with a group of colleagues by collectively accomplishing a social goal. For Honneth, solidarity can be understood as an interactive relationship in which subjects sympathise with different ways of life because, among themselves, they esteem each other symmetrically. Practices withholding recognition of individuals' unique characteristics and contributions limit their opportunity for self-realisation.

In the second theme, the discussion was concerned with identification and recognition and how they could create conditions for self-realisation. A lack of identification with the affordances opened by recognition placed people in a position of resistance. Identification at work was intertwined with additional financial reward. Though Honneth treats redistribution of goods and wealth (materialism) as derivative and social recognition as the most important category, struggles for a decent salary can be considered legitimate. It becomes symbolically significant for participants to receive a proper salary that recognises the work they do. Without the financial aspect, recognition may be seen as empty.

The third theme argued that non-recognition could marginalise or confine individuals to the periphery of practice, limiting their opportunities to develop. According to Honneth, the quest for recognition lies at the heart of social conflict. The potential for resolving a conflict in favour of a particular party creates the possibility that the individual's identificatory position can change from resistance to self-realisation. Identificatory positions are thus dynamic and fluid rather than set and immutable. The nature of the participants' experience revealed that identificatory positions could be somewhat ambivalent. The community of practice may recognise some aspects of the individual; similarly, the individual may identify with particular facets of its practice. Recognition and identification are thus often ambivalent and contradictory, further underscoring the potential for individuals to shift

between the different identificatory positions depending on how they interpret their experience. It is difficult to consider recognition in absolute terms. Participants received recognition from multiple sources. Family also featured as a significant source of recognition in the data. The three levels of recognition thus cannot be viewed as discrete but as mutually influencing.

What contribution can Honneth's ideas make to understand recognition in RPL? An individual's self-esteem level is significantly developed through the contributions he makes to society through formally organised labour. RPL can here be a potential way of raising the value of the tasks performed by workers within these professions and allow self-realisation through work. To be able to progress and develop in work, other individuals such as colleagues, managers and, in the RPL process, tutors and other students must recognise the individual's skills and unique contributions. When one is not recognised, one's freedom to participate in work practices as an autonomous subject and learn thus becomes limited. The individual must also identify with the practices of the community. Intersubjective recognition forms the basis of identity and self-esteem. While Honneth argues that intersubjective recognition enables self-realisation and self-esteem, this depends on the extent to which the individual identifies with the associated participatory opportunity. Though recognition in itself can build esteem and pave the way for self-realisation, re-distribution and salaries cannot be neglected. A proper wage is one of the strongest symbolic indicators of how work is valued. As argued elsewhere, revaluing care work is important to creating a just society. The result here suggests that individuals do not progress in recognition by leaving behind family as they move into education, but they can instead draw on all three forms at once. While individuals may lack recognition in some areas of their life, they may attract recognition from other practices. A question arises about what the educational process and conferring of the qualification represent. RPL is a potential

source of validation in recognising an individual's competencies gained through work. It can open up further participatory opportunities and sources of solidarity. If RPL allows participants to transcend non-recognition in the workplace, it represents a widening of the cultural values available to participants when appraising their qualities. With government targets and expectations for qualifications, RPL legitimises individuals beyond what may be available through workplace practice. It would be appropriate to say that RPL, to some extent, raises the social esteem of care work. However, these benefits are only possibilities that depend on the individual's identification with the associated practices and the particular currents and crosscurrents of recognition and non-recognition in each particular practice. RPL and recognition appeared to raise the participants' self-awareness: they had a deeper appreciation of the skills and knowledge they possess. Arguably, RPL enables the participant to forge an enhanced identification with the self that can increase the positive relationship with oneself. Framing this in Honneth's work, the result of enhanced self-esteem could have a positive effect on the individual's work communities. Solidarity is not possible if individuals do not have this positive and practical relationship to themselves; low esteem and confidence threatens to destroy the prospect of solidarity at work. RPL can, based on these results, play a positive role in esteeming workers.

7. Discussion

The thesis aimed to problematize an RPL process for accreditation in health care by reconstructing this process against and analyse it through communicative action and recognition theories. This analysis adds to theorisation in the research area and displays new ways to interpret RPL. In four papers, the analysis has progressed through a more critical analysis of the power issues, especially in the relationship between participant and teacher in the first two papers, to a more reflexive analysis of the possibilities for critical learning and change in the third. Paper 4 has analysed the implications that recognition could have for self-realisation and identity in RPL. This discussion aims to revisit the results of the papers and go a bit further, discussing some of the more solid conclusions and the implications such conclusions might have for RPL research and practice. A connection between the RPL study conducted in this thesis, education and adult education is then examined. Some reflections on the theories used are also advanced. At the end of this section, some issues for future research are considered.

Conclusion and implications for RPL research

A limitation in RPL research is the lack of theorisation. What was earlier referred to as ‘Kolbianism’ has for long been somewhat hegemonic, and the need to break this trend has been and will probably continue to be important. As this thesis demonstrates, there is a need to problematize RPL to be able to instigate a more thorough discussion of the power issues in RPL practices. When such issues can be examined,

there is also a possibility to advance discussions on developing RPL. RPL research also seems to lag behind contemporary developments in social and educational theory (Andersson & Harris 2006). One reason for this is that RPL has become a radical social movement occupied with enhancing social justice, and a critical analysis of RPL practices becomes a critique of this social movement. Prior research on RPL for accreditation is critical, but theories rarely underpin such critical disputes. There is a need for theoretical analyses that disturb and question RPL and do so by forming strong and solid arguments based on theory. This thesis has implications for RPL research by adding to this theorisation.

Prior experiences and learning cannot per se be seen as positive. Such a naïve romantic view (Brookfield 1998) can hide power issues in RPL practices. It threatens to reproduce work practices in occupations normatively and uncritically, as in health care work, where there is a strong need for critical discussions, enlightenment and change, as argued in this thesis. Most important, a simple view of prior learning does not create suitable and critical adult learning conditions and risks reducing RPL to a process of instrumental assessment. By critically theorising RPL, this thesis has allowed capturing some critical issues in this RPL context. The following more general questions were raised in this thesis: What are the power issues in the RPL process? What implications does the tension between the lifeworld of work and system of education have? What consequences do mutual understanding and communication have for the RPL process outcome? What part does recognition play for the participants? Following these questions the conclusions of the thesis adds insights into i) the power issues in RPL; ii) the importance of communication and mutual understanding in RPL assessment; iii) the relationship between prior lifeworld grounded learning and the educational system in RPL; iv) the possibilities of critical learning and change in RPL; and v) the worth of Honneth's recognition theory for understanding RPL in its impact on self-realisation, learning and identity formation. Using communicative action

to analyse RPL, it is possible to display the following. In paper 1, a caring ideology, adopted by the teachers in the process, revealed power issues that would almost certainly remain hidden in a less critical analysis. What first seems to be a nice comfortable atmosphere could, through critical analysis, reveals several substantial issues. A critical analysis uncovers that the educational system controls what counts as proper knowledge through this caring ideology and regulates which prior learning counts as legitimate and true. It thus enables an instrumental assimilation of prior learning, knowledge and experiences that fit the curriculum. Perhaps more debatably, it becomes an informal and uncritical acknowledgement of the participants' caring identities, thus reproducing a problematic normative discourse in a highly gender-segregated occupation. In paper 2 a closer look at the assessment process, examined the power issues and the consequences of a lack of mutual understanding. Several participants considered the assessment interview confusing and muddled. Participants raised questions of how the assessment was conducted and how the teachers documented their prior learning, though they did not question the teacher's authority. It seems vastly important that students in RPL are given the opportunity to understand and critically discuss their prior learning and experiences. The RPL process thus did not seem to live up to ideals in adult education and hindered critical learning and change through RPL.

It is also important to emphasise the relationship between the system and lifeworld. In RPL for accreditation, students bring lifeworld grounded learning, experiences and knowledge from work to be assessed against the educational system (e.g., grades, curricula). Communicative action is used to show the hazards in such an instrumental process: It could result in a process where money (i.e. grades) and power force their way into the lifeworld and assimilate prior learning to fit the system's demands. If viewed this way, RPL for accreditation can be seen as an instrumental assessment

process that marginalises learning and critical discussions of prior learning in the lifeworld of education.

Papers 1 and 2 are devoted to critically appraising aspects of the RPL process. Papers 3 focus on the potential for critical learning, development and the fourth on recognition. An overview of prior research on RPL for accreditation reveals a negative picture. There is much criticism about RPL for accreditation, but as stated above, such criticism is rarely theoretically underpinned. Although this criticism is still legitimate, it does not always help improve RPL, especially because alternatives are rarely communicated as the result of such critiques. Some researchers dismiss RPL for accreditation completely and instead promote more developmental models. However, as argued in paper 3, RPL for accreditation could be developed to combine more formal and technical assessments with critical and developmental discussions of students' prior learning, knowledge and experiences. During the students' RPL placement, it was possible to identify and analyse examples of the possibilities for critical developmental discussions about the student's prior learning and the potential for learning and positive change. Communicative action offered a framework for such an enterprise, both in critically analysing RPL and suggesting ways to improve RPL practice (discussed below).

In paper 4, the thesis uses Honneth's recognition theory to analyse RPL. Data from a project exploring paraprofessional learning in the U.K. were integrated with the data underpinning this thesis. Six case studies were developed to examine the benefits of using Honneth's theory to analyse RPL. Recognising an individual's traits and abilities through RPL could enhance the positive relation to the self and improve participants' esteem. This allows self-realisation, but the participants must be able to identify with the recognition offered in RPL.

Implications for RPL practice

Some conclusions in relation to RPL practice should be highlighted. A general implication for RPL practice that this thesis demonstrates is the importance of mutual understanding, especially between teacher and participant. Participants in RPL must reach mutual understanding with the teachers about the goals of the process and how they should act as participants in RPL. Both students and teachers must also be sincere and truthful when expressing themselves subjectively. Another implication for RPL practice is that a distinct balance should be created between the prior experiences, learning and knowledge that students bring with them from the lifeworld of work and the educational system when performing assessments. It is not helpful to totally ignore the potential of RPL for accreditation. Instead, instrumental and formal assessments should focus on mutual understanding integrated with critical discussions of prior learning. RPL for accreditation could, by reflecting the results of communicative action, thus be a process that strengthens social integration, solidarity and developing personal identity among its participants. RPL would then encourage critical learning in the lifeworld of education through reflections on prior learning, experiences and knowledge gained in the lifeworld of work. Communicative action could inform and enhance a teacher's work with RPL. Teachers and participants must agree on a mutual definition of the RPL process prior to its implementation and how the participants should act in RPL. This would allow participants to present a subjective picture of their prior learning. It is also important that the results of the RPL process and assessment are clearly communicated. This would enable these experiences to be mobilised when students move on and use these experiences in new learning contexts. Teachers working with RPL should also be informed about the power issues involved in such processes. The results of this thesis could hopefully enlighten

teachers about the issues and actions that they may not be able to notice themselves⁴².

Honneth's recognition theory can help RPL teachers understand what impact recognition could have for an individual's self-esteem development and how RPL processes can support self-realisation. Such processes require mutual recognition. Teachers should understand that participants must identify with the recognition offered in RPL.

Connecting RPL research to adult education

Questions about knowledge, authority, qualifications and different types of learning will always be with us. Once RPL is freed from its largely rhetorical role as the great radical strategy or the great solution to inequality, it offers a unique and very concrete set of contexts for debating the fundamental educational issues that such questions give rise to and for finding new ways of approaching them. (Young 2006 p. 326)

As Young states, RPL offers research contexts that can be used to further understand education in general. This thesis adds to this notion. One conclusion that can be drawn from the results of this thesis is that when education focuses on assessment, learning is pushed to the periphery and the education system threatens to colonise the lifeworld of education

This thesis also demonstrates the importance of mutual understanding among students and between teachers and students. When such relationships do not work, it impedes learning. The caring ideology analysed in paper 1 is relevant to adult educational practices. It raises questions about how teachers should approach their students. Do students in adult

⁴² It seems plausible to refer to the famous quote by Marx: "Sie wissen das nicht, aber sie tun es" [They are doing it but they do not know they are doing it]".

education truly need someone to care for them? It is more likely that they need a teacher who *recognises* their particularity and encourages them to think critically and analyse their prior learning, experiences and knowledge. There is thus potential for learning something new, potential for positive change. These are well-used concepts, but adult education should encourage transformation and/or emancipation. Teachers in adult education and education in general are responsible and should inspire students to learn how to critically analyse their prior experiences from work and life in general. They are responsible to encourage students to go beyond what the students take for granted because

A defining condition of being human is that we have to understand the meaning of our experience. For some, any uncritically assimilated explanation by an authority figure will suffice. But in contemporary societies we must learn to make our own interpretations rather than act on the purposes, beliefs, judgments, and feelings of others. Facilitating such understanding is the cardinal goal of adult education. (Mezirow 1997 p. 5)

Theoretical reflections

How can a critical social theory analysis be used in future research? Hopefully, future research in education, adult education and RPL will continue to develop new ways of interpreting and using both Honneth and Habermas for analysis. This seems important to pursue when education goes through instrumental changes (e.g., focusing on ‘quality’, ‘grades’ and ‘employability’), and we are witnessing how money move into the lifeworld of education through privatisation (especially apparent in a Swedish context). Such developments do not seem to enable proper learning conditions. It seems appropriate to raise questions of how individuals are supposed to learn critically through communication and participate in mutual recognition processes in solidarity with others when such instrumental

changes occur. However, these developments put critical social theory on the agenda for educational researchers. This thesis has been able to show how critical social theory can be used to analyse the pathologies we experience in RPL. But, as is the case with the normative theories of both Habermas and Honneth, this thesis also suggests ways to challenge such pathologies.

Future research

There are many questions that this thesis cannot answer. What happened when the participants returned to work after finishing the RPL process and in-service training program? Did their approach to work change? These questions require further research. Such inquiries could evaluate the worth of the RPL process and what long-term results it had for both work practice and the participants. The results presented in this thesis also suggest that an RPL process could be developed that focuses on mutual understanding and critical discussion, thus enhancing social integration, solidarity and developing personal identity. RPL could legitimately encourage critical learning in the lifeworlds of health care and education instead of merely assimilating prior workplace-oriented learning by assigning grades based on that work within the education system. Though this type of RPL model does appear to have potential, it must be further developed. On a more general level, several areas within RPL require future research, including assessment, power, learning and gender. As discussed above, RPL contexts could also be used to debate more general issues in education and adult education. RPL should no longer be seen as a separate phenomenon. It is intertwined with and part of the practice of education.

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9. Appendix

Appendix I. Methods and data used in the analysis

Method	Whom? What?	Number	Documentation	H total
Interview I	Participants	9	Recordings	3 h
Interview II	Participants	14	Recordings	18 h
Group interviews	Participants	2	Recordings	1h
Observations	Mainly during the mapping period.	-	Observation notes and Recordings	100 pages of notes and 10 h recordings

Appendix II. An overview of the assessment methods in the RPL process

Method/Process	Purpose	Assignments	Documentation	Time
Self Reflection/assessment	Assess/reflect on prior learning according to own expectations. Discuss this with teacher.	Fill in a form	Form	
Group work	Work with different tasks related to courses.	Case Keywords Movies	None	
Reflection dairy	Reflect on the RPL process etc.		Personal notes	
Assessment interviews	Two teachers and one participant are involved. One of the teachers asked questions to the participant, drawn from the content of the courses. Another teacher documented the interview by taking notes.		Notes.	1-1/2 h
Follow-up interviews	The same as above but with one teacher. The purpose was to obtain more information about the participant's prior learning, since the assessment interview did not provide enough information		Notes.	1 h

Guidance interviews	Introduce the participants to their personal schedule.			
Course goals	The participants are given documents for each course, including the goals for each course.			
Theoretical follow-up	Discuss and assess the theoretical aspect of each course with the participants as group.	Reflect on a form handed out by the teachers		Ca; 20 h
Written assignment	Write an assignment to be able to receive a higher grade in a course.	Write a paper	Paper	
Other	Short conversations with each participant after the theoretical follow-up to discuss their participation.			
RPL practicum/placement	Assess the participant's prior learning in practice. Discussions between tutor and participant initiated by questions in a form.	The tutor fills in a form.	Form	6 weeks
Three-part actor interviews	Collect form and discuss the placement in connection to each course	Discuss form with teacher	Notes (occasionally)	

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