

Ethics, Equity, and the Politics of Recognition

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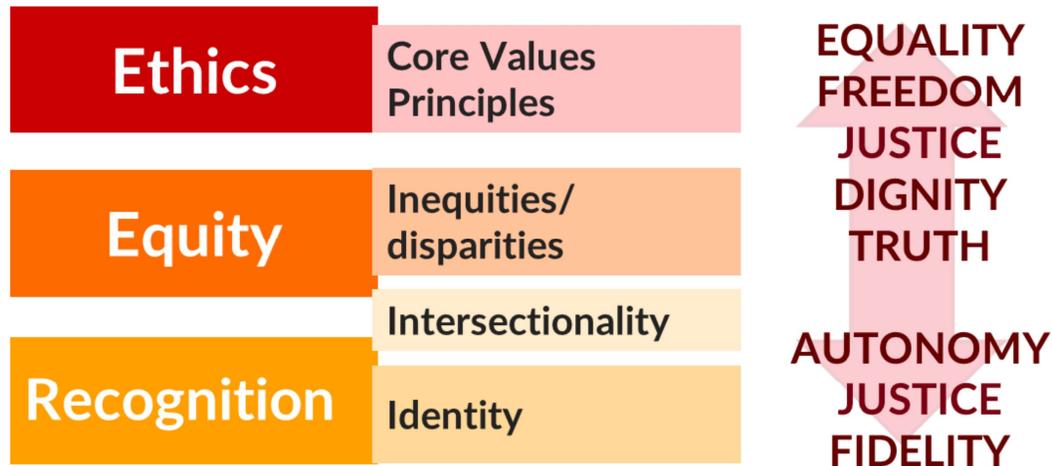


Good evening and thank you all for being here! Tonight I'm delighted to be talking with you about "Ethics, Equity, and the Politics of Recognition."

I want to preface this talk by saying that while I believe that dealing with ethical issues in practice is exceptionally important for professional development, I also think that sometimes it's helpful to be pushed beyond looking at the AOTA Code of Ethics so that we are thinking about our ethics not just in practice settings, but also more broadly. We will consider the AOTA Code of Ethics tonight, but I hope you leave here thinking about our professional ethics a bit differently. I hope you leave here thinking about how our commitment to the OT profession and to health and wellness for all people creates ethical demands on us to move toward goals of equity, justice,

inclusion, and the celebration of diversity.

Defining terms...



I suspect the terms ethics and equity are quite familiar to you, but the “politics of recognition” may be less so. So I will start there to get us on the same page for our discussion. Recognition is in essence exactly what you probably think it is...it is being identified and known. We talk about recognizing someone’s voice, or the way they walk. We can talk about how we recognize by someone’s expression that they are confused. In a larger sense, being recognized contributes to the development of identity...for individuals, organizations, groups, and populations. *Recognition is about being seen for who you are.*

Recognition becomes political when those who are recognized can influence policy. When those who hold power bestow some of that power on whomever

they recognize. The politics of recognition put systems in place that encourage individuals, communities, and populations to assimilate, or to adopt the identity most favorably recognized in order to “earn” power. Or, on the other side of that coin, those systems may encourage the enactment of an identity so contrary to the favorable one that they can be recognized for their extreme difference.

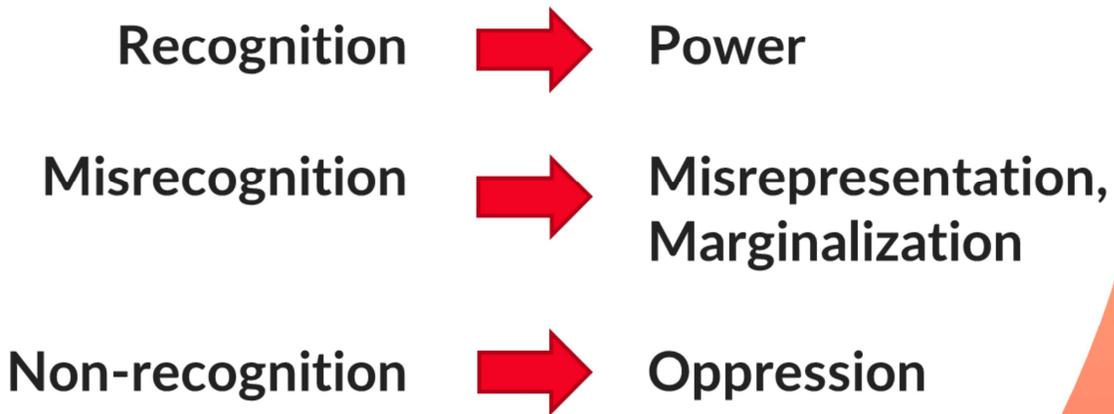
I want to clarify another concept that we need to consider when we talk about recognition and identity, and that is intersectionality. The introduction of this term is attributed to Kimberle Crenshaw, an American civil rights advocate and a leading scholar of critical race theory, and it has gained widespread use in discussions of justice and equity. Individuals, communities, and populations take on multiple identities, some of which are primary and influence a great deal of action or behavior, and some of which play lesser roles. Regardless, intersectionality complicates the politics of recognition. For instance, an individual may be recognized in a favorable way for being wealthy, but at the same time receive less or no recognition for being gay. That individual then is pressed to negotiate how to leverage their identities to gain power, to influence policy, to have a role in how our societies operate.

We also are going to include equity in our discussion today, and so we must acknowledge that disparities are part of the equation as well. For us as OT and OTA practitioners, that includes the health disparities experienced by many individuals who come from minoritized populations and communities. There also are disparities in who has access to education, including OT/OTA education. And there are inequities and biases experienced by OT and OTA

students in their educational programs. So our consideration of equity has to include not only our clients but also our workforce and students.

The newest Code of Ethics from AOTA includes both core values of the profession and ethical principles. The first five items listed to the right on this slide are among the core values: equality, freedom, dignity, justice, and truth. The remaining three are considered ethical principles upon which we operate: autonomy, justice, and fidelity. Clearly there are some shared meanings between the core values and the principles, but I think it's worth noting that the word "justice" appears in both lists. These are not all of the core values or principles included in the Code of Ethics, but are the ones I want us to keep in mind as we move forward here, as having relevance for both equity and recognition.

Politics...



I would like to illustrate a little more about the politics of recognition.

Recognition itself is important, and the word does not imply judgement...that is, recognition can be for “favored” or “non-favored” attributes or actions.

Regardless, as soon as you are recognized, you have at least some power...you are at the table.

However, misrecognition also occurs. The attributes or actions of an individual, community, or population are identified incorrectly...they are seen for what the viewer *thinks* they are, rather than for their true identities.

Misrecognition can lead to misrepresentation and/or marginalization.

Intersectionality can play a significant role in misrecognition. I may be recognized for only a single identity, such as being “old,” and then be

misrecognized as incompetent with technology and denied opportunities to work with a new team to develop an innovative health and wellness app. Now this example is not a dire one...all of us have likely had experiences somewhat like this, where only one aspect of our identity has been recognized, rather than people seeing us for who we are more fully. However, when we think about the stereotypes that continue to be active in our society, we see more readily how misrecognition marginalizes. If we use teaching materials in the classroom that consistently show Black people in content about working with poor or uneducated communities, what message are we sending that misrepresents an entire race of people? This is a rhetorical question, of course - I'm not suggesting that any of you are thinking in this way, but rather that people DO think this way sometimes.

Nonrecognition is the most detrimental of these concepts. If I essentially eliminate one or more aspects of your identity from how I see you, then at the very least I do nothing that supports you. Worse, I may actually ignore you to the point of preventing you from accessing what you need. If as a clinician I refuse to acknowledge your identity as transexual, I prevent us from having an important and potentially life-altering conversation about how you can engage in sexual activity following a spinal cord injury.

Before I leave this slide, I want to emphasize that recognition, misrecognition, and nonrecognition can be intentional or unintentional. We all know that implicit bias, or our own unconscious judgements about various aspects of others' identities, can potentially prevent us from seeing people for who they

are...from recognizing them fully. But there also are contexts, conditions, and people within our work settings and systems beyond that that use recognition of “favored” qualities or nonrecognition of “unfavored” qualities to keep power and control located squarely where it is. So we are talking not just about our own ways of recognizing others, but also how organizations and systems may use the politics of recognition to their benefit.

Take 1 minute to think...

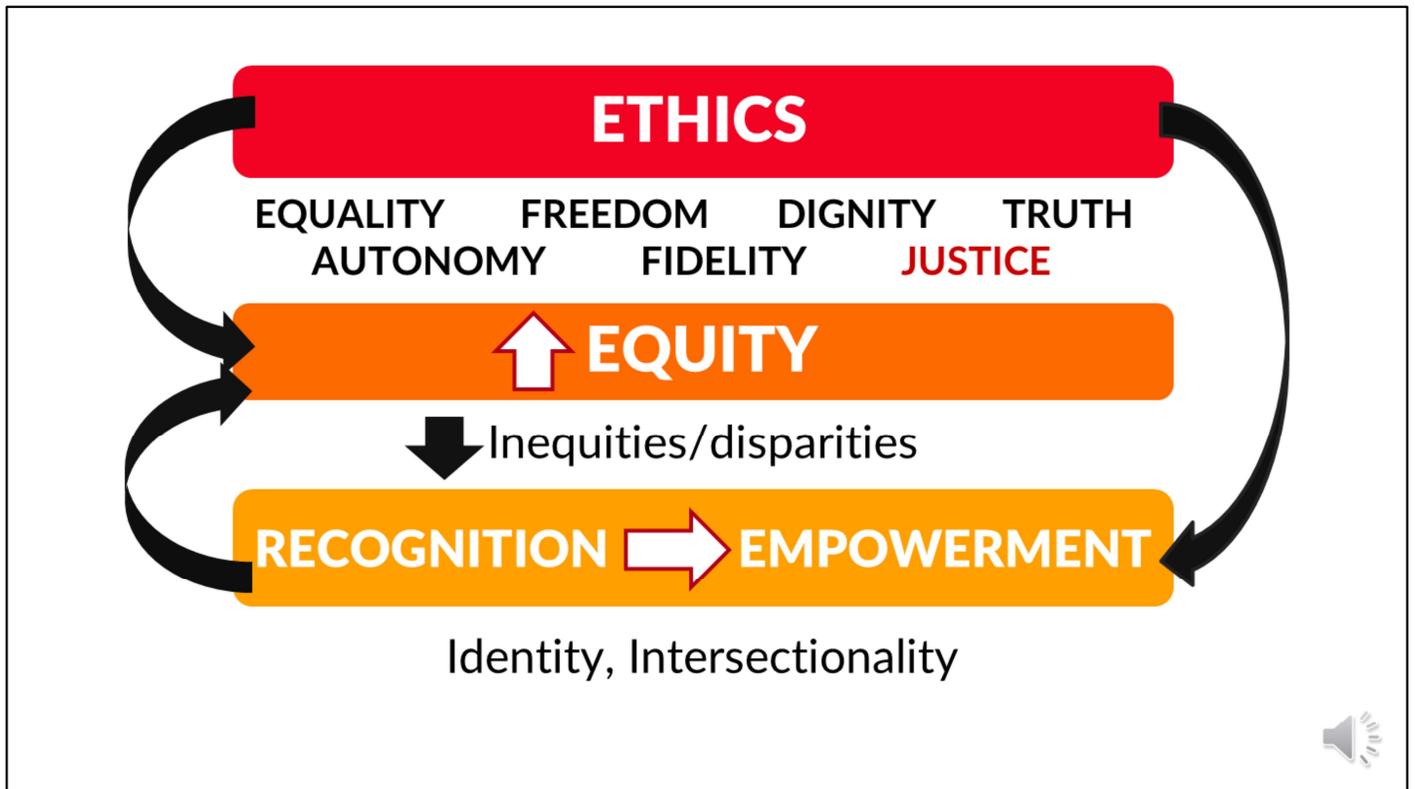
Recognition
Misrecognition
Non-recognition

Take 3 minutes to share



I'd like you to take one minute just to think about a time in your own experience when you or someone you observed was recognized, misrecognized, or non-recognized because of one of their identifying characteristics. What was the outcome of that in terms of autonomy, freedom, justice, or power?

Now take 3 minutes and share your story with the person next to you. Is there anyone willing to share what you and your sharing partner talked about?



I want to put back together the three constructs I've been talking about here. For some of you this may be unnecessary repetition, but I want to make sure I'm being as clear as possible. Our Code of Ethics clearly support our empowerment of others. The values and principles listed on this slide in particular make that clear. Our Code of Ethics also supports, even demands, that we work for equity...that we acknowledge inequities, honor our commitments to our clients, students, and peers, and work to diminish those disparities and others and increase equity overall. So the relationship between our ethical values and principles and empowering others is clear, as is the relationship between our ethics and equity. We have an understanding of how recognition works to empower, or marginalize, or oppress, and we can use that understanding, in large or small ways, to see, acknowledge, know our clients, students, and peers...to make them welcome...to empower them to be who they are and to support the performance of occupations that come with their identities. All of this contributes to our work toward justice and equity.

How do we, in our professional lives, engage in recognizing the identities of others in order to empower them?

How do we make this a habit of our thinking?



Our challenge then is to figure out how we as professionals engage in recognizing the identities of others in a way that empowers them? Of course not all individuals, whether they are clients or coworkers or students in our OT programs will readily allow all their identities to be known by us, and that's fine. But how can we manage our own behaviors and develop habits of thinking that automatically see when others are not recognized, and then problem solve to address the result of that?

Examples

- Hair care materials and products in inpatient hospital setting...
- Developing written materials regarding sexual activity for a variety of audiences
- Bringing up and addressing the additional concerns of a Black mother about the ways in which the behaviors of her autistic son are being perceived in day care....
- Asking for holiday décor that represents multiple faith traditions and “winter” instead of just Christmas decorations in an agency office building
- Considering specific cultural traditions when addressing self-care tasks (bathing rituals, use of feeding utensils, non-Western clothing styles, etc.)



On this slide I've listed a few examples from my own experiences, either in my own work settings or in talking with other OTs.

- This first example comes from an OT working in an acute care setting. She noted that hair care materials and products in her setting were not appropriate for all hair types, and many of her patients needed something different. As a Black woman herself, she had a key understanding of the implications of this issue and advocated for changes.
- Developing written materials regarding sexual activity for a variety of audiences is a need that was highlighted for both students and clinicians working with gay, lesbian, and transgendered individuals in a rehab setting.
- I've more than once needed to address the additional concerns of a Black

mother about the ways in which the behaviors of her autistic son were being perceived in day care, given the potential for his aggressive or non-compliant behaviors to be attributed to his race.

- OT students and I made a request a few years ago for holiday décor that represented multiple faith traditions and “winter” instead of just Christmas decorations in a human services agency office building.
- I’m sure many of you have had opportunities to point out similar issues, including consideration of specific cultural traditions when addressing self-care tasks (bathing rituals, use of feeding utensils, non-Western clothing styles, etc.)

Some of these are relatively small, in-the-moment examples, rather than huge changes in policy or management on a long-term basis. But those bigger changes also are possible when we develop habits of thinking about the politics of recognition, and others see our efforts. It only takes a spark to get a fire going...

Take two minutes to think and write:

- Are there (or have there been) policies, procedures, “ways of doing” in your work setting that prevent or discourage recognition of one or more identities of clients, students, or coworkers?
- What are your ideas (or what has been done) for addressing these situations and recognizing these aspects or identities in a way that supports freedom, autonomy, dignity, and justice?

Take 5 minutes to share...



So now, if you have paper and pen, make some notes...otherwise just organize thoughts in your head...take two minutes to think about:

- ▶ Are there (or have there been) policies, procedures, “ways of doing” in your work setting that prevent or discourage recognition of one or more identities of clients, students, or coworkers?
- ▶ What are your ideas (or what has been done) for addressing these situations and recognizing these aspects or identities in a way that supports freedom, autonomy, dignity, and justice?

Now, get in groups of 3 or 4...small enough groups so everyone can participate, and share your thoughts or experiences...

Are there any groups that are willing to share your ideas?

In closing, we have discussed:

- Our professional ethics as a press to work for equity and to support others by empowering them to be who they are...
- Equity as dependent on recognition
- Recognition as empowering, misrecognition as marginalizing, and nonrecognition as oppressing
- Our own experiences of recognition, misrecognition, and/or non-recognition
- Ways in which we can empower others by recognition

Our ethical challenge:

To make **empowering others by recognizing them** a habit of thought in our day-to-day work.



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Our challenge:

To make **empowering others by recognizing them** a habit of thought in our day-to-day work.

"If you think you are too small
to make a difference you haven't
spent a night with a mosquito."

-African Proverb



References

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