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**The sociology of
social recognition:
competition in social
recognition games**

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ABSTRACT

Evidence shows that social recognition works as a motive for many of people's behavior. Within sociology, a longstanding tradition has shown that this recognition motive produces social and symbolic boundaries, encompassing consumption patterns and different lifestyles, and that the need for social recognition can, for example, explain violent behavior. In this paper, I provide a conceptual framework of how social interactions are affected by the need for social recognition. A natural starting point to theorize about social interactions is Goffmanian Game Theory. However, Goffman excludes underlying motivations in his analyses. Therefore, I supplement the analysis with elements from rational choice theory; a theory that, in itself, scarcely bears attention to the internal structure of social interactions. This study results in an analytical scheme of the actors and factors that affect social recognition games. Also, it reveals the competition that is likely to occur within particular social recognition games. As a result, this framework allows a better understanding of how social recognition affects social interactions, and offers a heuristic tool for the analysis of the impact of social recognition on a variety of behavioral domains.

Social recognition, social interactions, Goffmanian Game Theory approach

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1. Introduction

Social recognition is the appreciation that people give each other. This recognition is exchanged within nearly all of our social interactions—of which the hugs that we receive from those who are close to us and the wary looks that the marginalized too often encounter are opposite examples. Clearly, social recognition is a broad concept, as it also includes social status, which is the recognition a society attributes to groups of people.¹ Furthermore, people are importantly motivated by the need for social recognition, because, as social psychological experiments show, the process of self-identification is driven by the recognition people receive from others (cf., among others, Tajfel and Turner 1986; Baumeister and Leary 1995; Bennet and Sani 2004; Tyler et al. 1999).

Within sociology, a longstanding tradition focuses on this need for social recognition and how it affects people's behavior and social interactions.² For instance, consider Adam Smith (1761, p. 84), who assigns social recognition as the central motivator in the acquisition of material wealth, "[t]o be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency and approbation." In this vein, scholars show that the need for social recognition is a major force behind social and symbolic boundaries in society (Bourdieu 1979; Lamont and Molnár 2002). For example, social recognition motivates consumption patterns both at an individual level (Chao and Schor 1998) and at a group level (Lamont and Molnár 2001). Furthermore, social recognition motivates people whether to adapt an (un)healthy lifestyle (Hammersley et al. 2001; Stuber et al. 2008), and it can explain violent behavior (Barry 2006; Gilligan 2003). In this respect, Harvard psychiatrist Gilligan (2003) has come to focus on the sociological key in crime. In the end, he argues, aggression and criminal offences are targeted at terminating situations of being shamed and disrespected, and at achieving pride and self-esteem (i.e. social recognition).

These analyses clearly establish social recognition as a full-fledged motive for human behavior against possible alternatives. The theoretical framework that these scholars use to back up their findings, foremost

¹ Perhaps some scholars would argue that social status in itself is not social recognition one receives, but rather a structural position within society. Nevertheless, directly attached to this structural position is an amount of recognition ("prestige" according to Goffman (1951)) a society in general assigns to that position as well as to the people who hold it.

² Another rich research tradition includes social recognition not as a motivator of individual behavior, but as a context factor. For example, Chan and Goldthorpe (2007) find that people with a higher social status read more newspapers than people with a lower social status. To explain such lifestyle differences, scholars mostly refer to educational attainment, cultural preferences, and, sometimes, the meshing with genetic background. Social recognition then is a mere context variable, not included to explain the specific behavior. Other recent examples of analyses which add social status as a context factor are: Alderson et al. (2007); Godette et al. (2009); Flere and Klanjšek (2009); and Rowley et al. (2007).

covers the importance of social recognition as a motive (cf. the next section). Theory is not used to examine *how* the need for social recognition might affect social interactions. However, a theoretical approach of how social recognition affects social interactions would allow for a better understanding of this process in general, and a conceptual framework could offer a heuristic tool for the analysis of the impact of social recognition on a variety of behavioral domains. Hence, in this paper I unravel which actors and factors determine social recognition driven interactions and thus provide a theoretical framework of social recognition and the social behavior it might elicit. Whereas previous schematics of social recognition and its behavioral impact (cf. Levine and Moreland 1987; Masters and Keil 1987) mainly focus on the psychological components of social recognition, a more sociological framework is warranted.

In a first section, I briefly elucidate the importance of social recognition as a motive for human behavior. To do this, I provide an overview of the main social psychological findings on this subject. From this overview, it follows that social recognition is acknowledged as a major motive, underlying, often unconsciously, much of human behavior. From the second section, the analysis focuses on the structure of social interactions that are driven by a need for social recognition. First, the basic elements of social recognition games are set out. Secondly, the social recognition game is set off by exploring the two constitutive processes: granting social recognition, and striving for social recognition.

The main theoretical framework from which I develop this analysis, is a Goffmanian Game Theory approach. Goffman has "remodeled" Game Theory to the realm of ordinary-life interactions (Burns 1992, p. 63). Therefore, this approach is particularly apt to study social interactions that are driven by a need for social recognition, since this motive affects various everyday-life social interactions. However, Goffman refrains himself from considering the underlying motivations for human interaction (for example, cf. Goffman 1959, p. 15; 1969, pp. 3, 36-37), which results in his characteristic context-free perspective.³ In contrast, that is exactly the aim in the present analysis, that is to scrutinize how the need for social recognition as an underlying motivator affects social interactions. Therefore, I supplement the Goffmanian Game Theory approach with rational choice elements.

This rational choice "economy of esteem" approach (cf. Brennan and Pettit 2005) explicitly starts from the need people have for social recognition, and allows us to observe scarcity and competition in social recognition games, and how these phenomena affect social interactions. Without adding these rational choice elements, the structural analysis of social recognition games would surely be incomplete. However, a sole focus on rational choice would neither suffice as a basis for the present analysis. Given that the rational choice approach focuses on outcome decisions and

³ An exception to this context-free perspective is found in *Strategic Interaction* (1969).

actions, the central focus of the present analysis would remain out of sight, that is, the actual structure of social recognition games.

As I argue in the final section, real-life recognition games impose considerable constraints on its players by restricting the number of potential game settings, and by concentrating people within a limited number of social recognition strategies. As a consequence, in order to gain social recognition, people compete with each other, often fiercely, within social recognition games. In conclusion, this paper provides a conceptual framework of social recognition games that could not be attained by a pure Goffmanian approach, nor a pure rational choice approach.

2. Social recognition in social psychology⁴

Social recognition is the appreciation an observer holds for the person he observes. This appreciation may be directed towards that person as a whole, or towards particular components of that person, such as particular skills. In addition, social recognition is a three-part normative phenomenon, since one can receive positive, neutral, or negative recognition (Pettigrew 1967, p. 244; for an empirical validation: Bargh and Chartrand 1999, p. 474). These normative labels point to the comparative character of social recognition: in the process of granting social recognition, observers (an audience) compare the person they observe (actor) with a benchmark.⁵ This benchmark consists of how the audience expects the actor to behave, or which characteristics, or belongings he is expected to have. Depending on how the actor compares to these expectational norms, the social recognition will be positive, neutral, or negative.⁶

Central to social psychology, and especially within Social Identity Theory, is the idea that social recognition provides a person with the confirmation of his existence (and how he exists) outside himself, that is, the confirmation of a person's self outside of the self (Forgas and Williams 2002). Should someone be isolated from others, and be engaged merely

⁴ This brief exposition on the importance of social recognition as a motive for human behavior could as well be based on the sociological literature on "social identity", as can be found in the works of, among others, Richard Jenkins (1996; 2000). Nevertheless, in the present analysis I prefer the social psychological perspective, since it presents social recognition as a motivator isolated from its sociological consequences. Many of the here presented insights will be referred to later in the structural analysis.

⁵ For a basic work on the comparative character of perception, see Sherif (1935).

⁶ Brennan and Pettit (2005, pp. 15-23) prefer the term "esteem" to recognition, since, according to these authors, recognition would not necessarily be comparative. However, recognition cannot have another benchmark than that which is provided by social reality, and thus always has a comparative character. Furthermore, Brennan and Pettit view esteem as a one-sided process, namely aiming only at distinction. In contrast, as I will show momentarily, social recognition also involves belongingness. Both processes are essential, and, I believe, better covered by the term social recognition.

in self-reflection, that person would risk being deceived by the demons of his own mind. Social recognition given by others breaks this spell, and provides a person with externally validated information about the self.⁷ In brief, one could say that we are all socially relative individuals.

Because of this dependency on the social recognition from others, people actively strive to achieve social recognition, which may involve both avoiding negative social recognition (often called “being shamed”) and gaining positive social recognition. Accordingly, psychological experiments and sociological analyses (especially in criminological sociology, cf. Barry 2006; Gilligan 2003) reveal that many behaviors can indeed be attributed to the need to achieve social recognition. Nevertheless, in most cases, social recognition is a covert motivator: though generally acknowledged as the motive underlying the behavior of others, it is denied for the most part as one’s personal motive (Wood 1996, p. 530).⁸ Yet, the evidence reveals the generality of the need for social recognition as an underlying, often unconscious, motivator for human behavior.

To see how this general need for social recognition takes shape in real life, Maslow’s social needs offer an excellent heuristic tool. Central in Maslow’s theory (1987, p. 17ff), is the fact that a person’s mental well-being is dependent upon the fulfillment of five basic categories of needs: (1) physiological needs; (2) safety needs; (3) love, affection and belongingness needs; (4) esteem need; and (5) self-actualization needs.⁹ The third and fourth of Maslow’s basic needs can be seen as a person’s “social needs” (see the reference to Lutz and Lux (1979) in Trigg 2004, p. 395): according to these motivations, people need to position themselves within and against others. As Social Identity Theory confirms, these are two crucial motivations (Brewer and Picket 1999; Leary 2002): belongingness (Maslow’s need to love, affection, and belongingness), and distinction (Maslow’s esteem-need).

⁷ The founding father to whom scholars mostly refer is George Herbert Mead (1934), in addition to James Mark Baldwin (*Social and Ethical Interpretations in Mental Development*, 1898), Charles H. Cooley (*Human nature and the social order*, 1902) and William James (*The principles of psychology*, 1890).

⁸ This should not come as a surprise, because striving for social recognition is due to what the American philosopher Scanlon (Scanlon 2000, p. 89n) called the “teleological paradox”: just like authenticity or happiness, it withers away when one is explicitly striving for it.

⁹ Since Maslow developed his theory, several aspects have been criticized (cf., among others, Trigg 2004; for a general discussion: Pearson and Podeschi 1999). Nevertheless, his primary idea, namely that of a limited set of basic needs, still receives general consent (Drakopoulos 2008). Whether the fifth basic need (self-actualisation) is valid, is not relevant for the present analysis, which only refers to the third and fourth basic need. Since this analysis primarily tries to explain modern Western societies, it is neither relevant as to if Maslow’s universal claims are warranted. With regard to the lexicographic ordering that some critics attribute to Maslow’s hierarchy of basic needs: Maslow himself explicitly stated that the hierarchy between basic needs was an abstract point of departure, which in real life loses much of its rigour, that is, “any behaviour tends to be determined by several or *all* of the basic needs simultaneously rather than by only one of them” (Maslow 1987, p. 29).

First, with regards to the need for belongingness, people create a “categorical social self” (Tyler and Smith 1999, p. 252), which means that we look for affiliations with groups with which we have certain characteristics in common. We want to belong, be a member of these groups (De Cremer and Blader 2006).¹⁰ In their empirically pioneering article, Baumeister and Leary (1995) found sufficient empirical evidence to corroborate the assumption that “human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships”. The importance of belongingness is also confirmed in the devastating effects caused by the absence of social bonds (social exclusion) on a person’s mental state (cf. Tice et al. 2002).

Secondly, with regards to the need of distinction, people also want to be recognized as individuals. In order to achieve acknowledgment as being oneself, and not just as a member of one or several social groups, people strive for distinction. A discreet position feeds a person’s “reputational social self”, which guides people to taking up a unique position. Through their reputational social self, people show that they “care not only about the position of their important groups in the larger social context but also about their position in important groups” (Tyler and Smith 1999, p. 261). In praxis, of course, the distinction motive is often hard to disentangle from the belongingness motive, since distinction is often achieved by affiliating with particular groups.

Taken together, these elements sketch the broad framework of social recognition within social psychology. Social recognition is the appreciation others hold for someone, based on a comparison with an expectational benchmark. It provides the necessary external confirmation of a self outside that self, to preserve a stable mental state. Hence, people actively strive to avoid negative social recognition, and to achieve positive social recognition. To do so, they try to establish belongingness with and distinction from others. In the proceeding sections, I depart from this empirically validated claim that social recognition is an important human motive and I provide a general framework of how this motivator affects social interactions.

¹⁰ Please note the plural: we affiliate ourselves with several groups. From this, it also follows that we have not one monolithic self, but that we instead swiftly shift between a number of selves (Brewer and Pickett 1999, p. 83; Tyler and Smith 1999; explicitly elaborated in Self-Categorisation Theory: Bennet and Sani 2004). How this switching takes place, and always has been, and still is, an open question (Adams 1963, p. 435; Biernat et al. 2002, p. 68).

3. Constitutive elements in social recognition games

This analysis of social interactions is based on a Goffmanian Game Theory approach (Goffman 1969).¹¹ This approach considers social interactions as if it were games that people play, and it is one of Goffman's merits to have "remodeled" this approach to ordinary-life interactions (Burns 1992, p. 63). The game metaphor is particularly apropos to the analysis of social interactions, since "[g]ames seem to display in a simple way the structure of real-life situations. They cut us off from serious life by immersing us in a demonstration of its possibilities" (Goffman 1961, p. 34).¹² As it follows, the game theory approach allows for a meta-conceptualization of social interactions. Some of the most eloquent examples of the game theory approach can be found in the work of Goffman, and in order to do justice to this tradition, I will use much of his terminology.¹³

The present analysis focuses on social interactions that are driven by a need, at least of one person, for social recognition. Therefore, I call them social recognition games.¹⁴ Before the analysis can focus on the dynamics of such social recognition games, it should be made clear as to which constitutive elements such games consist of (what Goffman calls "the role-set"). This role-set is set out in the remainder of this section.

¹¹ This approach clearly differs from both rational-choice Game Theory (see Burns 1992, pp. 58-63 on the differences and similarities of these two approaches) and Wittgenstein's language Game Theory.

¹² Other scholars (cf. Brennan and Pettit 2005) have used the metaphor of a competitive market. However, this metaphor is less appropriate. In contrast to a competitive market, competition for social recognition is foremost present at the demand side. Furthermore, people never receive an actual right to receive social recognition. Those who strive for social recognition are never sure that, in the end, they will indeed receive recognition from others.

¹³ The first time these expressions appear in the text, they will be italicized. References for these expressions are: actor (1969, p. 86), acts of display (1979, pp. 1-5), audience (1959, pp. xi, 16; 1961, p. 85), commitment (1969, p. 114), communicated and expressed information (1969, pp. 5-6; for a related distinction, see 1959, p. 2), dialogue (1972, pp. 150-171), gameworthiness (1969, p. 96), impression management (1959, pp. 208-237), observer (1959, pp. 16, 22; 1969, p. 12ff), party (1959, p. xi; 1969, p. 86ff), performance (1959, pp. 15-76), role (1961, pp. 85-95), role conflict (1961, p. 90), role-set (1961, p. 86), stage craft (1959, p. 15), strategic interaction (1969). For non self-evident expressions, in-text references and explanations are given. Let it be clear that the selection does not at all exhaust the Goffmanian game-theoretic vocabulary.

¹⁴ It should be noted that Goffman refrains himself from considering the underlying motivations for human interaction (for example, cf. Goffman 1959, p. 15; 1969, pp. 3, 36-37), which results in his characteristic context-free perspective.

3.1. Two main parties: actor X and his audience

In a strict sense, a recognition game consists of two *parties*: *actor X*, that is, those who try to achieve social recognition, and his *audience*, those who can provide social recognition.

ACTOR X >-----< AUDIENCE

Since the conclusion of social psychologists is that every person has a need for social recognition, actor X potentially stands for anyone. It is also possible that actor X stands for a group of persons. The audience, in many cases, consists of a number of *observers*, but it can just as well be comprised of only one individual (which can be actor X himself).¹⁵ Much of the literature in social psychology focuses on the situation in which actor X is his own audience (cf. Suls and Martin 2004). In the other extreme case, the audience can consist of the total world population, now and in the future.¹⁶

3.2. Game objective: achieve social recognition

In a social recognition game, actor X tries to engage some people into a particular *dialogue*. More specifically, he tries to achieve social recognition from his audience, and actor X does so by giving a *performance*. Two things should be noted. First, social recognition is not an item that an audience can pass onto actor X. Actor X never really gets hold of his social recognition. Rather, social recognition is to be seen as a service, namely holding (or not) a certain attitude towards actor X. Consequently, if the audience stops rendering this service, actor X's social recognition vapors away. Second, there are no strict rules from which actor X can open an entitlement to social recognition. Though it is true that within a particular setting, it is fairly possible to indicate from which position actor X will elicit which social recognition (positive, neutral, or negative). Nevertheless, actor X cannot force his audience to apply this particular setting. For instance, a good amateur musician may try to persuade his audience by his musical skills, if, however, the audience compares this musician with professional musicians, the amateur will not receive positive social recognition.

¹⁵ In the present analysis, I scarcely focus on group processes. Especially actor X is commonly conceived as being one person. Though I believe that the elements of group processes with regard to the need for social recognition would very much coincide with the framework presented here, an additional analysis would surely offer a useful extension of this framework.

¹⁶ As long as people have no knowledge of the future, actor X can have no audience in the past.

3.3. The object

Actor X's performance is the object on the basis of which an audience grants social recognition. The concept of "performance" should be broadly understood, namely as possibly referring to all three aspects of a person's extended self (cf. Belk 1988): having, doing, and being. An audience may grant actor X social recognition because of his possessions, on account of what he does, or due to the person he is.

A social recognition performance is certainly not a typical performance. A typical performance is centered round the *communicated* and *expressed information* that actor X passes on to his audience (the former uses conventional communication, whereas the latter consist of *sign vehicles* which *frame* the directly communicated information). For example, actor X may say he has a prestigious occupation, but his sloppy appearance may cast doubts upon his statement. In social recognition performances, things are somewhat more complicated. In fact, many social recognition performances consist of a sub-game: within a certain domain, actor X tries to out-perform a third party, namely his opponents (or at least tries not to be out-performed himself). This third party may coincide with actor X's audience as well. The aim of the sub-game is to attain a position relative to his opponents, and actor X then hopes that this position will elicit social recognition from his audience.

To sum up, the constitutive elements of recognition games can be summarized as follows: social recognition games are played between two parties, actor X and his audience, and actor X tries to elicit social recognition from that audience by giving a performance (which often consists of a sub-game against his opponents).

4. The breadth of theoretical play

After having set out the basic elements of social recognition games, this section initiates the social recognition game. The social recognition game can be divided into two processes: that of granting social recognition (what the audience does), and that of striving for social recognition (what actor X does). The first subsection makes the first process explicit, which at the same time reveals the routes available for actor X to strive for social recognition. These are then discussed in the second subsection. By the end of this paragraph, it will be made clear that social recognition games seem to encompass an excess of game settings and strategies.

4.1. Granting social recognition

4.1.1. A complex process

Before setting out how an audience grants social recognition, it needs to be emphasized that the process of granting social recognition is complex. There are many variables concerned, each of which has many options (i.e. static complexity). For example, actor X's audience can consist of his household members, family, friends, colleagues, fellow club members, fellow villagers, fellow citizens, etc. In a similar vein, these audiences may grant social recognition for many different aspects of actor X's performance (skills, attitudes, ..., or the performance as a whole). In addition, next to static complexity, one can also witness two instances of dynamic complexity: several social recognition games may be ongoing (actor X plays several roles (Goffman 1961, p. 90), sometimes even for the same audience), and within each social recognition game, all parameters may change over time.

In the following subsections, more factors are discussed that increase the complexity of social recognition games. In the discussion, however, the complexity is left aside, though the reader should bear it in mind.

4.1.2. Visibility

A first condition that needs to be fulfilled before the audience can grant social recognition is that actor X is visible to his audience (cf. Goffman 1959, pp. 30-34). This "visibility" of actor X needs to not be taken literally. For example, social recognition can be granted solely on the basis of testimonies from others, in other words, when the audience has never seen actor X with their own eyes.

4.1.3. Perception

The visibility of actor X leads to a perception of actor X amongst the audience. On the basis of the sensual stimuli, the audience interprets the situation, that is, it categorizes the new stimuli within its cognitive framework. Following the Thomas-theorem – If people define a situation as real, then it is real in its consequences (cf. Merton 1948) – the importance of this perception cannot be overstated. It makes some significant questions irrelevant within the process of social recognition. As an example, you can think of an actor X who wants to affiliate with some group in society. One can wonder whether actor X himself affiliates with this group, or whether it is the group that accepts the affiliation of actor X. Seen from the process of granting social recognition, however, it is the audience that has the power to affiliate actor X with the particular group

in society or not.¹⁷ If the audience perceives actor X as affiliated, this perception has real-life consequences (being worth positive, neutral, or negative social recognition). Of course, actor X's audience need not be an external group of people, but can just as well be the social group with which actor X wants to be affiliated, or himself. In the latter case, actor X himself determines whether or not he is affiliated. However, as is evident, without any external confirmation, this form of self-reflection runs a high risk of being illusive, and is an unstable basis for social recognition.

4.1.4. Opinion

Once actor X is visible for the audience, an automatic cognitive process takes place. As the first section has shown, the audience's perception of actor X immediately holds a classification of actor X. "We cannot help but form opinions" (Brennan and Pettit 2005, p. 54). These opinions that the audience maintains about actor X are essential within the process of granting social recognition. In fact, these opinions *are* the social recognition that actor X receives from his audience. The positive, neutral, or negative social recognition is implied in the, respectively, positive, neutral, or negative opinion the audience holds on actor X. These opinions and their normative connotation are "surplus phenomena:" they happen to the audience, and simultaneously, fall to actor X. As the social psychological literature has shown, through the swift encoding and decoding of opinions, the audience's social recognition towards actor X is accessible for actor X.¹⁸

4.1.5. Domain

A fourth issue in the process of assigning social recognition is the domain: granting social recognition always takes place within a certain domain (or "dimension under evaluation" (Wood 1989)). This means that the characteristics for which actor X may receive social recognition is embedded in a particular context. By way of example, actor X may be an academic scholar with his bibliographic record as the characteristic under scrutiny by his colleagues. The point of this example is that the audience can consider actor X's bibliographical record using very different domains. One possibility is that, as has recently become common, the audience is first and foremost interested in actor X's international academic publications. However, another possibility is that the audience is also looking for actor X's societal relevance, which leads to a broadening of the

¹⁷ In contrast, when defining what constitutes a "group," Merton held that an individual's membership is only real when it has been confirmed by both the individual and the other group members (cf. Pettigrew 1967, p. 251).

¹⁸ Of course, as in all forms of communication, mismatches do occur (cf. Fazio 1986). Nevertheless, "contrary to lay beliefs about the validity of impressions formed on minimal information, the research [...] demonstrates the remarkable accuracy of such judgments" (Choi et al. 2005, p. 326; also see Ambady and Rosenthal 1992).

initial focus with more general publications. The domain from which the audience starts its social comparison process gives the attribute of actor X that the audience considers its contextual embedding.

Furthermore, the audience, when assessing actor X, also considers (if the information is available) "related attributes," also called "surrounding dimensions" (Wood 1989). Aspects like gender, age, and experience significantly influence an audience's opinion about actor X.¹⁹ As an example, to assess the academic skills of senior researchers, the audience first and foremost compares this scholar with other senior scholars. In other words, to whom actor X is compared to is influenced by the related attributes. This brings us to the final parameter in the process of granting social recognition: the reference group.

4.1.6. The reference group as expectational norm

As has been stated in the social psychological section, social recognition is the result of a comparison of actor X with some expectational norm; also called "comparison level" (Pettigrew 1967, p. 244) or "standard of comparison" (Biernat et al. 2002). The question is: "what does the audience expect from actor X?" In brief, the expectations an audience holds towards actor X are derived from a reference group.²⁰ A reference group is "any group ... that individuals use as basis for social comparison" (Forsyth 2004). These particular others (also called 'social categories') "constitute the scene" against which actor X takes shape (Goffman 1959, p. 253). The audience expects (the characteristics of) actor X to correspond with (those of) the reference group, the latter thus providing the audience a benchmark against which it assesses actor X.²¹ Of whom this reference group consists of, is discussed in the following paragraph, which summarizes some of the main findings of reference group theory. As it shows, the reference group is another highly variable parameter within the process of granting social recognition.

¹⁹ What may seem curious is the fact that these surrounding dimensions need not, though they often are, be related to the domain under evaluation (Wood 1989, pp. 236-238). By way of example, although the subjects of an experiment did not relate someone's ability of logical reasoning to attractiveness, when assessing their personal logical reasoning abilities, subjects compared themselves with others who were similar in physical attractiveness.

²⁰ Also, Pettigrew (1967, p. 244) points at the fundamental entwinement in social comparisons between the norm, the reference group and the expectations others have towards us (and the expectations we have towards ourselves).

²¹ The reference group is closely related to the concept of the significant other (cf. Owens 2007). In the terminology used here: significant others are the reference group(s) with which actor X wants to affiliate.

Who is in the reference group?

Potentially everyone, even fictitious characters (Wood 1996, p. 522), can serve as a reference group (Merton and Rossi 1968 [1949], p. 35). Obviously this seems to undermine the theory's predictive power, and brings Pettigrew (1967, p. 260) to the following conclusion:

[t]he [reference group] theory's breadth is a considerable asset in untangling the complex web of normative and comparative influences of groups upon individuals. ... Yet the breadth of the theory is not only its principal strength but its principal weakness as well.

Possible reference groups are countless (e.g. even actor X himself, namely in his past performances) and audiences are found to use several reference groups simultaneously (Merton and Rossi 1968 [1949], pp. 40-48; Hyman and Singer 1968, p. 12; Stern and Keller 1968 [1953]; Delhey and Kohler 2006), the latter fact forms the key element in self-categorization theory (Bennet and Sani 2004)).

To bring order amongst these potential reference groups, scholars have distinguished "similar others" (Festinger 1954; Wheeler 1966) from "dissimilar others" (recently strongly affirmed by White and Dahl (2007)). The question then is, of course, what is similar, and what is dissimilar? To settle this matter, Goethals and Darley (1977) introduce the concept of "related attributes." If no other information of actor X is available than how he performs in the domain under evaluation, similarity is determined by actor X's outcome in that domain (cf. academics who present a paper on a particular conference), which creates dissimilarity on related attributes (e.g. age, gender, experience, etc.). If the audience has knowledge of related attributes concerning actor X, similarity on these attributes is chosen as the basis for further comparison.²²

A second distinction that is often used to classify reference groups is downward versus upward comparisons. The former occurs when an audience uses a reference group whose performance level is lower than that of actor X; the latter when the performance level of the reference group is higher than that of actor X. Experimental data confirms that audiences indeed use both downward (Brickman and Bulman 1977) and upward reference groups (Collins 1996).

In sum, the reference group is another highly variable parameter in the process of granting social recognition. However, a point that recurs later in the analysis is the fact that in real-life, neither actor X nor his audience always freely picks and chooses the reference group with which actor X is assessed. In other words, the theoretical variability diminishes in actual play.

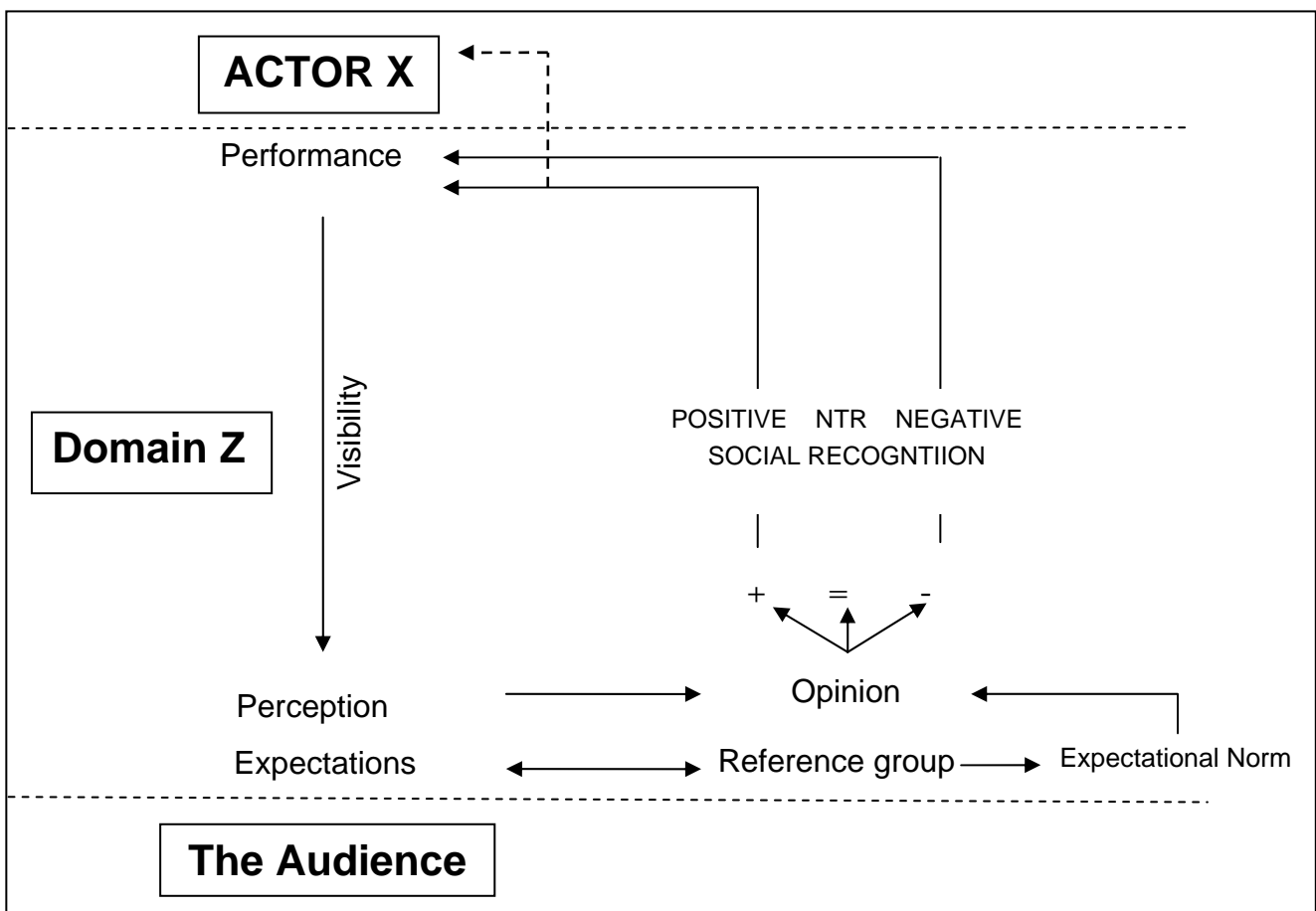
²² An interesting point, made by Pettigrew (1967, p. 246), is that an audience, to be able to focus on similar or dissimilar others, needs to have some prior notion of the distribution of standpoints. Otherwise, it cannot know who is (dis-)similar. In other words, the audience has already made some comparison of the potential reference groups.

4.1.7. Recapitulation

Figure 1 visualizes the granting of social recognition. This process, situated within a certain domain, initiates with actor X's performance being visible for the audience. When this image of actor X turns into a perception among the audience, the audience instantly forms an opinion on actor X. This opinion, which immediately holds the social recognition, is based on an assessment of actor X against a norm that is abstracted from a reference group (of which the audience expects actor X to be of equal standing). If actor X does not come up to the norm, he will receive negative social recognition. If actor X exceeds the norm, he will receive positive social recognition. The dotted line in Figure 1 from social recognition to actor X denotes the essential impact social recognition has on individuals: social recognition is the confirmation of the self outside of the self.

The provisional conclusion from the discussion of the separate parameters is that the process of granting social recognition is highly miscellaneous and random, since all parameters have numerous fill-in options. Before moving to the second process within social recognition games, that is striving for social recognition, a final observation needs to be made.

Figure 1. The process of granting social recognition



The above description of granting social recognition involves the direct granting of social recognition by the audience. However, social recognition can also be granted indirectly. In this respect, Brennan and Pettit (2005, p. 55) speak of social recognition “services”. As an example, the audience can give testimony of (the relevant characteristics of) actor X, through which also the audience of that testimony comes to recognize actor X. Another possibility is that persons who are highly socially recognized invite actor X in their group or entourage. As social recognition can reflect on people in the surroundings of a highly recognized person, actor X can become socially recognized as well.²³ Characteristic of these cases is that (part of) the initial audience takes on the role of a third party, which provides a service by which actor X may receive social recognition by another audience. As a result, when striving for social recognition, actor X may also want to take up third parties in his strategy. How this striving process takes place, is laid out in the next section.

4.2. Striving for social recognition

From the section on social psychology, it follows that, for actor X, striving for social recognition is a significant process. Social recognition is essential for an individual’s mental state, and hence, a basic motivator: individuals actively strive for social recognition (which includes avoiding negative social recognition). Of course, not every human action is aimed at gaining social recognition. However, also in actions not directly aimed at pursuing social recognition, often this motive is nevertheless present, that is, as a guideline. For example, unexpectedly leaving a game in which actor X engaged himself is likely to lead to a loss of social recognition from his co-participants. In the final section of this paper, more will be said about this requirement of *commitment*. Here it suffices to see that whether and how other-purpose actions are carried out or not, or recur in the future, largely depends upon the fact whether these actions are conducive to social recognition or not (Brennan and Pettit 2005, p. 47). As it follows, actor X is prominently occupied, often unconsciously, by operating his existing social roles so as to acquire social recognition, or he will try to establish new social roles to do so (Merton 1957). The strategies available for actor X to strive for social recognition is to manipulate the just set out parameters of granting social recognition.²⁴ Before actor X can do so, he must first acquire information about these parameters.

²³ In psychology, the fact that personal traits may reflect on others is called “social trait transference” (cf. Uleman et al. 2005).

²⁴ “Manipulation” here has a neutral connotation: purposefully changing a particular setting. Certainly, in some cases actor X’s manipulations will consist of deceit and feigning (Goffman 1959, pp. 2, 70ff), but this need not, and often will not be the case.

4.2.1. Informational social comparisons

Acquiring information about the social recognition game mainly involves making social comparisons. Primarily, actor X will assess the game setting with the purpose of self-evaluation and self-improvement (which mostly occur simultaneously).²⁵ The former provides actor X with his relative standing, the latter with the goals he wishes to attain. Furthermore, actor X has to assess the game-setting as broadly as possible in order to determine the best strategy. For this purpose, information on all parameters may be useful, for instance on his opponents, but also on his (potential) audience. The capacity to acquire all of this information is extremely important, and significantly determines actor X's *gameworthiness*. However, within social recognition games, information seeking can be considered as a preparatory activity, and, though important, will not be given further attention here.

4.2.2. Social recognition and the teleological paradox

Before describing the different manipulation strategies, it needs to be said that actor X should proceed cautiously when striving for social recognition. Social recognition cannot be achieved at a simple word of command. Social recognition requires actor X to take up a particular position within a recognition game. Furthermore, actor X cannot compel his audience to perceive the situation as he wants them to. It is very likely that an audience uses other game parameters, such as the reference group, than those which actor X is playing against. And, as has already been noted (cf. note 6), the teleological paradox implies that the more actor X will try to compel his audience (actor X as a real show-off), the less likely it will become that actor X will receive social recognition.

However, social recognition does not totally fall under this teleological paradox. For example, a virtuous pianist really showing off his virtuosity may miss social recognition as being an amiable person, but the audience cannot but affirm his virtuosity, and for that characteristic, the pianist will receive social recognition. Furthermore, the audience seems to accept that people, to a certain extent, actively aim for social recognition (Brennan and Pettit 2005, p. 48). In other words, actively striving for social recognition involves playing on a precarious balance. As a consequence, actor X will have to proceed cautiously.²⁶ When in the following paragraphs it is set out how actor X can try to manipulate the different

²⁵ Where Festinger (1954) finds self-evaluation as the function of social comparisons, Shibutani (1955) introduces self-improvement. Another important function of social comparisons, introduced by Hakmiller, in the early 1960s, is self-enhancement (cf. Pettigrew 1967, p. 245). In self-enhancement the "goal of social comparison [...] is to maintain or improve self-esteem or well being" (Suls and Martin 2004, p. 543).

²⁶ Other reasons why actor X should proceed cautiously include that playing a certain social role always runs the risk of being discredited (Goffman 1959, pp. among others, 51-66).

parameters in social recognition games, the reader must bear in mind that actor X is always faced with the constraints of the teleological paradox.

4.2.3. The manipulation process

In striving for social recognition, actor X can try to manipulate all parameters of the process of granting social recognition (see Figure 1 above).²⁷ However, because of the entanglement of these parameters, actor X has less degrees of freedom than could be expected. In the final section of this paper, one of the purposes is to demonstrate how a change in one parameter usually affects other parameters. Nevertheless, the schematization below disentangles these different parameters. Their discussion is aimed to provide an answer to the question: "What can actor X do to receive (better) social recognition?"

Manipulation of actor X

The most obvious parameter that actor X may want to manipulate, is himself. Suppose that all other parameters are fixed, that is, the domain at which actor X participates, the audience that observes actor X, the reference group and norm used by the audience to assess actor X. In that case, in order to (better) receive social recognition, actor X can do one of two things. He can manipulate his level of performance, or he can manipulate the audience's perception of his performance. The latter strategy will be discussed as a separate point. Here I will briefly examine the strategy of manipulating one's characteristics (such as performance level).

Clearly, actor X cannot manipulate all of his characteristics. Sociologists have divided a person's characteristics into ascribed and achieved characteristics, depending on whether the characteristic is under the control of actor X (Bills 2007). Ascribed characteristics (such as gender and heritage) are beyond a person's control, whereas persons are more or less held responsible for their achieved characteristics (such as effort). It may be obvious that actor X may receive social recognition for both kinds of characteristics. Nevertheless, from the ascribed-achieved distinction it follows that, in a direct sense, actor X can only manipulate his achieved characteristics.²⁸

²⁷ In his equity theory, Adams (1963, pp. 427-430) discerns analogous strategies which people can pursue to decrease the tension stemming from a perceived inequity.

²⁸ In real-life, the division between ascribed and achieved characteristics is not always clear. For instance, one can wonder where the influence of genetic and social heritage ends, and where personal responsibility comes in. However, this analysis leaves the question about personal responsibility and free will aside, and simply assumes that people, to some extent, can be held responsible for some of their characteristics (which then can be called "achieved").

Manipulating one's achieved characteristics comes down to manipulating one's level of performance, either by putting in more (or less) effort, or by training more (or less) (so as to achieve a better performance with the same effort). Much of human behavior can be explained as such, that is, as further training and schooling, and all other forms of the personal development of one's characteristics.²⁹

Manipulation of the domain

The second parameter that actor X may want to manipulate, is the domain. At first sight, the domain can be seen as a sub-game in which actor X chooses to participate or not. As it follows, participation then seems to be an arbitrary question. Actor X will primarily participate in those domains of which he thinks he is good at, since it is in these domains that actor X can exceed the norm, and thus has high chances to receive social recognition. To those domains in which he does not manage to be successful, actor X will either give as little attention as possible, or he will withdraw from them in total.

Nevertheless, the desire to participate in a certain domain depends on more than just personal talents. Actor X faces two contextual constraints that affect his participation in particular domains. The first constraint is that in some domains the stock of potential attention/recognition is larger than in other domains, and hence, the attractiveness to participate in a particular domain differs likewise. The second constraint is that actor X cannot always choose to participate in a certain domain: sometimes an audience draws actor X in a recognition game, which he did not select himself. How these two constraints limit actor X's play, I discuss in the final section of this paper.

Manipulation of the audience

The third parameter that actor X may want to manipulate in order to receive social recognition, is the audience. The audience can differ both in quantity and quality. The quantity of the audience denotes the number of people that the audience consists of. At one point in time the audience consists of a fixed number of people. Hence, the quantity of the audience can only be manipulated diachronically. It is generally assumed that actor X will try to enlarge the audience for attributes for which he thinks he will receive positive social recognition and to reduce the audience for attributes for which he thinks he will receive negative social recognition.

Saying that the audience can also differ in quality, means that actor X can be observed by several, different audiences (either at different points in time, or simultaneously). By way of example, actor X's family, colleagues,

²⁹ Plato (1999, pp. 205a-206b) asserted that in the fulfillment of such acts, individuals will find their happiness, and it will help them to arrive at the perfection of the self.

and the general, anonymous audience will most probably form three different audiences for actor X. Each of them sees actor X from a particular perspective, with its particular reference group/expectational norm, sometimes from totally different domains. In such situations, it is likely that actor X will face *role-conflicts*. Much of people's worries concerning the life-work balances can be studied from this perspective. Irrespective of possible role-conflicts, actor X will try to manipulate the quality of the audience by addressing audiences that pay most attention to the attributes and domains for which actor X supposes to receive positive social recognition, and of which the social recognition offers actor X the highest value.³⁰

A specific strategy to manipulate either the quantity or the quality of an audience is what Goffman (1969, p. 74) calls "planting," and this implies manipulating an audience by using another audience. For instance, in the hope to achieve recognition of a particular audience, actor X may try to achieve social recognition from the significant others of that audience. By way of example: politicians above all try to impress journalists, since their social recognition will show in their reports, and affect the social recognition that the politician will receive from the electorate.

However, manipulating an audience is not without risk. In fact, actor X faces two threats when manipulating his audience (apart from the fact that the manipulation attempt may fail): ideal deficiency and fact deficiency (Brennan and Pettit 2005, p. 28). Ideal deficiency means that, as the audience changes, there is a good chance that the expectational norm changes with it: new people look at things from their (new) own perspective. Fact deficiency means that, if the audience becomes larger, often a proportion of the audience has not seen actor X personally, but knows actor X only by reputation. In that case, there is a possibility that the reputation of actor X will start to live its own life, and becomes disentangled from actor X's real life. In both cases, the audience's expectational norm has changed, and actor X runs the risk of falling short of these new expectations.

Manipulation of the reference group / expectational norm

The reference group / expectational norm is the fourth parameter that actor X may want to manipulate. As explained above, the audience derives the expectational norm from a reference group. In order to manipulate the reference group, actor X has three strategies at his disposal. The first, and most direct strategy, is that actor X literally asks his audience to compare him with another reference group. Statements voiced by amateurs in a domain, such as, "I am only a dabbler!" are often uttered in this regard. A second strategy to manipulate the reference group, is much more indirect, and consists of (one of) the manipulation of

³⁰ Below, more will be said about the fact that the value of social recognition may vary according to the context.

the three recently mentioned parameters, that is, actor X himself, the domain, or the audience. A change in one of these parameters often entails a change of reference group. For example, by increasing her performance level, a sportswoman may lead her audience to compare her no longer only with the national, but also with the international top. Where the first two strategies try to change the reference group qua composition, the third and final strategy tries to change the audience's perception of the reference group. For another sports-related example: if an audience thinks that a marathon can be run in one hour (an obviously fictitious expectational norm), it is in the interest of a marathon runner to inform this audience that even the world's fastest runners still need more than two hours.

Manipulating perception and visibility

The final two parameters that actor X may want to manipulate are perception and visibility. Perception, as it has been used here, consists of the audience's cognitive processes, which categorize all kind of social stimuli. On this neural process, actor X has no impact whatsoever. Nonetheless, perception also has another meaning, namely that of presentation. The way things are presented greatly influences how they are perceived, whether or not it has been consciously manipulated. In his *acts of display*, actor X intentionally tries to influence his presentation. Consequently, *impression management* or *stagecraft* is an important element in the process of striving for social recognition. Actor X may gain more or less social recognition only by putting oneself, or the relevant domain or reference group in a better or worse light.

In addition, the issue of visibility applies to several of the parameters in social recognition games. Actor X can try to manipulate the visibility of a particular domain, of a reference group, or of himself. In theory, actor X has two main strategies at his disposal: to attract new attention (e.g. foster curiosity for a domain within an audience, which so far was not interested in that domain), or to clear away obstacles which hindered an audience that was already looking in his direction. However, in reality, both strategies are hard to disentangle. Is an announcement for an eco-friendly product stirring eco-consciousness, or is it making a product public unknown thus far? Most likely it does both. Either way, enhancing (or decreasing) one's visibility is a useful key to interpretation of a significant part of human behavior.

4.3. The breadth of theoretical play: concluding remark

In brief, in this section I provided an analytic depiction of social recognition games. Actor X strives for social recognition, which is given by an audience. Crucial elements in the process of granting social recognition are: the visibility of actor X; the domain on which his audience concentrates; and the reference group with which he is compared. In striving for social recognition, actor X can try to manipulate all these elements.

It is worth reiterating that for his manipulation attempts, actor X is to a great extent at the mercy of his audience. Actor X can try as hard as he is able to manipulate any or all of the considered parameters, however, so long as his audience does not follow him in this, his attempts are in vain. A frequently used metaphor is that of actor X as a small fish (or a frog) who wants to increase its social recognition by stressing the outstanding party to which it belongs (the size of the pond in which it lives): "A small fish may try to focus on pond size, but find that others focus on the fish's (low) status in the group rather than on the (high) status of the group" (Tyler and Smith 1999, p. 256; also see Frank 1985).

Whereas the theoretical play of social recognition games leads actor X to a plethora of manipulation options (a myriad of domains in which actor X can choose to participate or not, numerous available audiences, countless possible reference groups/expectational norms, and all of the many available impression and visibility strategies). In practice, however, the manipulation options available to actor X turn out to be much more limited. And, this has not only to do with the fact just mentioned that actor X is at the mercy of his audience to follow him in his manipulation process. Other clues in this respect are the fact that the social recognition of some audiences bears higher value for actor X than the social recognition of other audiences, and the fact that actor X cannot always simply change the perspective (domain, reference group, etc.) with which an audience approaches actor X. These, and other phenomena, restrict the real-life options in social recognition games. As a consequence, the striving for social recognition turns into a (sometimes fierce) competition between socially relative individuals. This is further elaborated in the next, final section of this paper.

5. Competition in real-life play

The above analysis, especially when I focused on the process of striving for social recognition, repeatedly encountered the fact that actor X faces constraints during play. These constraints are further discussed here. In addition to concentrating on only the two main parties in social recognition games, that is, actor X and his audience, the subsequent paragraphs also focus on the *strategic interactions* between actor X and his opponents. As I argue in this section, these strategic interactions often turn into a

competition that is not to be taken lightly. First, social recognition requires positioning oneself relative to one's opponents, and consequently, always involves some form of competition: only a few can stand out (inherent scarcity). Second, competition is intensified by the fact that people have a preference for general social recognition, which pools people together in the same high-stock social recognition games, and that they are inclined to continue their striving (rational scarcity). Third, there are a number of social recognition games and game parameters that actor X cannot escape (imposed scarcity).

5.1. Inherent scarcity

The first reason why people have to compete for social recognition stems from the nature of social recognition itself. As already stressed in the first section, social recognition involves a comparative judgment: the audience does not give social recognition for actor X's intrinsic worth and value, but for his worth and value in comparison with others (the reference group).³¹ This social comparison implies that people have to surpass the expectational norm to elicit positive social recognition, or that they have to avoid lagging behind to avoid negative social recognition. In the remainder of the text, I focus on trying to receive positive social recognition. Nevertheless, it should be clear that similar conclusions hold for trying to avoid negative social recognition, and that this last motive guides many behaviors as well.

Because positive social recognition requires surpassing the expectational norm, it is not something everyone is able to achieve. "Not everyone can be first in an ordinal ranking" (Brennan and Pettit 2005, p. 21). At the moment that everyone would stand out of the expectational norm, the norm will have risen (or fallen) accordingly. Hence, time and again, only a few can stand out.³² Moreover, situations with a lower number of positions to stand out are often more valued than situations in which it is fairly easy to stand out. This is best explained by the idea that not every social recognition is equally valuable to actor X.

For instance, a compliment, which is here taken as a sign of social recognition, given by an expert, will (in most cases) have more importance than the same compliment given by a layman. In general, experts have a more extensive and depersonalized expertise regarding a particular domain (Swann 1984, p. 472). Consequently, they are more

³¹ I reiterate that the reason for this is not that the audience would not want to give recognition for actor X's intrinsic worth and value, but that it is not able to do so: it has no idea of actor X's intrinsic worth and value. The only way for an audience to get an idea of actor X's worth and value is to compare him with others.

³² Sometimes, social comparisons are based on a very narrow norm, consisting of only one person, which implies that many people can stand out. However, as I see it, these comparisons are used to provide details of actor X's relative standing, rather than to arrive at a general evaluation of actor X.

acquainted with the range of performances within that field. Therefore, the social recognition stemming from an expert is seen as a more objective sign of actor X's outstandingness. Underlying this phenomenon is the fact that an expert's expectational norm is stricter than that of laymen. As a consequence, the positions to stand out become scarcer, which, in turn increases the competition to occupy such a position.

A similar phenomenon is observed with regard to the size of the audience: social recognition is often valued higher if it comes from a larger audience. Social recognition coming from one person has a rapidly diminishing marginal utility: once that person bears social recognition for actor X, more or higher recognition from the same person adds little extra to actor X's recognition account. This contrasts sharply with more social recognition coming from additional people. As it follows, when people expect they will receive positive social recognition, they often try to enlarge their audience.³³ However, the larger the audience from which one wants to elicit social recognition, the more difficult it becomes to stand out. This is due to the distance between actor X and his observers in a larger audience. For the most part, larger audiences consist of observers who are less acquainted with actor X. And, the less an observer is acquainted with actor X, the more anonymous the reference group will be to which actor X is compared. An audience observing someone close knows many related attributes of that person and will use a reference group to compare that person who shares many of these related attributes. In contrast, an audience tends to compare a stranger only to a more general reference group. Yet in general, it is less easy to stand out in a broader, more general reference group, than in a small reference group. As a result, to enlarge one's audience, one has to really stand out.³⁴

In short, social recognition is intrinsically scarce because of the fact that only a few are able to stand out. Furthermore, the scarcer the outstanding positions, the higher they are valued. However, these two aspects alone cannot explain why the competition for social recognition would intensify. The plethora of potential domains, audiences and reference groups would allow people to strive for social recognition in so many recognition games so as to prevent formidable competition.³⁵ Yet, the remainder of the

³³ Actor X may also be concerned with the size of its audience for another reason, such as planting (cf. above). For instance, outsiders might regard the size of the audience that is giving social recognition as a warrant for the validity of that social recognition. Consequently, the size of the already recognizing audience may persuade others to also come to recognize actor X.

³⁴ Of course, this description makes abstraction of group processes, such as that of a snowball effect: once an audience gains a certain size, it starts to "spontaneously" attract outsiders to join the audience and adopt the recognition judgment on actor X.

³⁵ An interesting question, also raised by Frank (1985, pp. 39-86) is why people participate in recognition games of which they know they will never stand out. Frank's argument is that people of lower standing are given compensations by people of higher standing, because it is the participation of lower ranked people that allows higher ranked people to stand out in the first place (Frank finds confirmation for this idea in the fact that within a firm, functions with a relatively poor marginal

analysis shows that, first, it is rational for people to converge in a limited set of recognition games, and, second, that the contextual setting to a large extent also pools people within a limited set of recognition games. Both trends intensify the competition for social recognition.

5.2. Rational scarcity: the restricting rational calculus

On the whole, people's behavior runs according to some basic rules, sometimes called the rational calculus (Goffman 1969, pp. 85-86). Because of this calculus, human behavior is less diversified as is potentially possible. Two particular instances in which the rational calculus restricts actor X's social recognition strategies are discussed here. First, because people share important preferences concerning social recognition, they often participate in the same social recognition games. Second, due to the process of hedonic adaptation, people are inclined to continue to strive for social recognition even though they have achieved the social recognition they initially aimed for. Due to these two patterns, competition for social recognition between people increases.

The first instance of rational scarcity implies that people cluster in a limited number of social recognition games, and that this is due to the fact that they share a preference for general social recognition. For the most part, unconsciously, people weigh up strategies of how best to pursue social recognition. For example, if people hope to receive "easy" social recognition, a suitable strategy might be to participate in small recognition games, in which the chance to stand out may be higher.³⁶ However, in many cases, people do seem to be satisfied with "easy" social recognition. But, to acquire more general social recognition, people have to participate in high stock social recognition games, such as recognition games with a large audience.³⁷ Because there are fewer high stock recognition games, and because they attract many players, competition within these games intensifies.

productivity are usually paid more than their productivity warrants and vice versa). Other possible explanations are that people with lower standing may participate for other (recognition) reasons, or that people may be confronted with a dominant recognition game from which they cannot step out (cf. further), or that people agree to take up low recognition roles as a compensation principle (to receive high recognition in another domain, they in turn need the participation of mediocre players there).

³⁶ Please note that many small recognition games are populated with passionate players, which results in a high average performance level.

³⁷ Of course, the participation of many players within one recognition game will also be influenced by other factors, such as visibility. High-stock social recognition games are mostly very visible, making people acquainted with the game, which, in turn, works as an incentive to participate. Furthermore, one should not interpret this point as if people only participate in high stock or high value games. In real-life, people participate in numerous recognition games, much of which have only a small potential of social recognition.

The second instance of rational scarcity is related to the process of hedonic adaptation. Hedonic adaptation implies that people's hedonic gains from a change in outcomes, which they evaluated as positive, wither with time (cf., among others, Clark and Senik forthcoming; Di Tella and MacCulloch 2008; Easterlin 2001; 2004; Van Praag 1993; Van Praag and Ferrer-i-Carbonell 2009).³⁸ The argument runs that people habituate to their new situation and subsequently adapt their preferences in order to achieve higher satisfaction through a better outcome.³⁹ An important issue is the fact that the theory does not apply to preferences for all kinds of goods, but it does for the preference for conspicuous goods (Frank 1999).⁴⁰ Does this then apply to the preference for social recognition? I argue that it does, even though social recognition is not a clear-cut conspicuous good, since it often remains invisible. For instance, highly esteemed scholars are seldom recognized in the street. Nevertheless, within the audience of academic scholars, social recognition is conspicuous, since it is directly related to conspicuous indicators, such as position, institution, grants, and publication record, and an implicit set of rules exists to signal these indicators. In other words, within recognition games, social recognition is conspicuous, because it reveals itself through conspicuous signs. As a consequence, the adaptation theory also applies to social recognition, predicting that people, once they have attained previously set recognition goals, will set new ones, because the initial satisfaction quickly withers away. As a result, whereas we would perhaps expect people to suspend their pursuit for social recognition once they gained the social recognition they initially aimed for, they will be inclined to continue striving for social recognition. As it follows, again, competition for social recognition intensifies, since competitors seldom step out of the game and continue pushing it further.

5.3. Imposed scarcity: dominant recognition parameters

The final and probably most important argument that turns striving for social recognition into an increasing competition is the existence of dominant recognition parameters. This argument differs considerably from that one in the previous paragraph. There, it was maintained that actor X selects the parameters of his recognition game (to a large extent he chooses to participate (or not) in a certain domain, and he tries to influence who his audience is, and to whom he is compared), though this selection is limited by rational scarcity. However, it would be erroneous to think that actor X always has the freedom to select the parameters of his recognition games. Not only is actor X in his selection at the mercy of his

³⁸ Other labels that have been used are hedonic treadmill, preference drift, or setpoint theory.

³⁹ There are, of course, other reasons why people set new goals after attaining previous ones, e.g. the pure fact of wanting to have a goal in life.

⁴⁰ This claim has been confirmed, among others, by Easterlin (2004), who finds that changes in family and health circumstances largely fall outside the scope of adaptation theory (also see Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Van Praag 2008).

audience to follow him in this, more important here is the fact that often the external world imposes a recognition game or a particular parameter on actor X. These are “dominant” recognition games or game parameters.⁴¹

Dominance here means that actor X cannot escape these games or parameters. Regardless of actor X’s intention to participate within a dominant domain, (a large part of) his audience will evaluate actor X according to that particular parameter, or will assess actor X as if he was participating in that particular social recognition game. A present-day example is the culture of the human body and the related obsession for slimness and eroticism.⁴² Whether actor X wants to or not, an audience will assess him in this recognition game. Highly related is attractiveness: again and again it is found that beautiful people gain better results than less beautiful people (be it in cognitive or personality assessments; as students, job-seekers,...) (Berger et al. 1972; Snyder 2001, pp. 30-31). In this case, it seems that attractiveness colonizes other social recognition games: intrinsically, study results or most job opportunities should have nothing to do with a person’s attractiveness; yet, this parameter does often influence outcomes in these recognition games.

Within social psychology scarce attention has been given to these imposed aspects of social comparisons. “By focusing primarily on the selection [made by actor X] ..., the literature has largely ignored what may be the most prevalent and potent type of social comparisons ... [: t]he comparisons that individuals do not seek but arrive unbidden” (Wood 1989, p. 244). However, empirical studies find that social comparisons that do arrive unbidden are significant. For instance, people who are subliminally primed (i.e. confronted with a visual stimulus too short to reach consciousness) with an image of an attractive or young person, evaluate themselves more unattractive, respectively older than people who are subliminally primed with an image of an unattractive respectively older person (Stapel and Blanton 2004, p. 471).⁴³ In these experiments, it is the reference group / expectational norm with which people assess themselves (or others, cf. Uleman et al. 2005, p. 384; Wood 1996, p. 524), that is significantly influenced, even unwittingly, by external, contextual factors. Because of the limited attention previously given to these dominant recognition parameters and games, the final point in this paper consists of a further elaboration of this dominance with social comparisons.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Brennan and Pettit (2005, p. 100) use the concept “non-discretionary.”

⁴² In *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, journalist Ariel Levy (2007) describes this culture of the female human body and its consequences on the social behaviour of women.

⁴³ For the impact of attractive others in a non-subliminal context, see Want et al. (2009).

⁴⁴ Sociological and social psychological encyclopaedias typically lack an item on dominance. An exception is “dominance theory,” which examines how and why some groups oppress and discriminate against people from other groups. Nevertheless, this is not how dominance is used here.

5.3.1. What is “dominance”?

As I already stated, dominance here refers to the fact that actor X cannot escape it. To see what this loose definition exactly means within social recognition games, I present three examples of dominant recognition parameters. These illustrations allow me to indicate what dominance is not. As it turns out, dominance is an unwieldy concept within the theory construction of social recognition games, since dominance is a rather open concept.

- The first example is anecdotal: “On a hurried morning a family finds out that they have run out of bread, and that there is no alternative than that one family member goes to get a loaf at the bakery straight away. Dutifully, the son throws on the clothes he finds first (a combination that makes him look like a clown) and rushes out. When he comes in again, he carries the bread but is very sad. In answering his family as to why he is sad, he says that outside the bakery he had met a beautiful girl. Unfortunately, she only gave him a quick glimpse, and turned her head with a mocking smile. The boy is sure, had he have worn some other combination, the girl would not have mocked him, but would have been impressed.” In short, the boy in this example is confronted with a social recognition game which he did not choose to participate in that morning. Quite the contrary, if he could, he would have run away from it. Yet, his participation was imposed on him.
- The second example is perhaps unlikely to occur, nevertheless possible. Conceive of actor X as a young researcher who is eager to build a career in the academic world. In order to do so, he develops his teaching skills, and he abundantly disseminates his research results during seminars, conferences, expert meetings—which gives him much approval. However, his application for an academic position is not taken into consideration, since he has totally neglected his publication record. In short, actor X freely decided to participate in the academic career game, but within this game, he is confronted with publication record as a dominant recognition parameter.
- The third example stems from academic research and describes the phenomenon of the stereotype threat. If people are asked to solve puzzles, their capability to do this is predominantly not related to their ethnic background nor gender. If, however, in the experimental context it is stressed that the experiment consists of a capability test, people’s puzzle-solving capabilities highly correlate with how their ethnic background or gender is typically stereotyped with respect to the capability at stake (e.g. African-American students perform less well (Steele and Aronson 1995), and Caucasian students perform less well in math puzzles in the case

where they are cued with the stereotype of Asian supremacy in mathematics) (Aronson et al. 1999).

All three examples concern instances in which actor X is given (or not) social recognition, be it by others (examples 1 and 2), or by themselves (example 3). Additionally, all three examples contain a dominant recognition parameter: a dominant audience in example 1 (where the dominant audience imposes a recognition game on actor X); a dominant domain in example 2; and a stereotyped reference group in example 3. Obviously, despite the common occurrence of dominance within these examples, they differ considerably. These differences help to sort out to what dominance in a dominant recognition parameter refers to or not.

In general, dominance refers to a situation in which a person lacks control. Yet, within social recognition games, one might lack control in a number of ways, not all of which are important here. First, dominance might be coupled with ascribed (in contrast to achieved) characteristics of actor X (cf. ethnic background in example 3). The idea then is that an assessment based on an ascribed characteristic is beyond actor X's control, since he has no control in this ascribed characteristic: actor X is female or male, has a certain age, etc., and there is little that actor X can do about it. However, as the dominant parameter in example 2 makes clear, this is not the dominance to which this analysis refers: a scholar's publication record is obviously an achieved characteristic, supposed to be largely within the scholar's control. Hence, the acquired versus achieved contrast does not determine dominance in a recognition parameter.

Second, one might assume that a dominant recognition parameter is exogenous to the initial social recognition game; "exogenous" meaning a parameter which one expects to be of no relevance for the recognition game. Look, for example, at illustration 3: puzzle-solving should depend on talent, learning, and effort, and should have nothing to do with ethnic background (contrary to what racist voices sometimes claim, these characteristics are not correlated (Kit et al. 2008)).⁴⁵ Yet, example 3 showed how the exogenous parameter (ethnic background) in fact does affect puzzle-solving results. In contrast, however, few would maintain that a publication record (the dominant parameter in example 2) is an exogenous parameter in assessing a scholar's academic skills. On the contrary, certainly today a scholar's publication record is part and parcel of his academic curriculum vitae, as in fact all young researchers do know (which shows their gameworthiness). Dominant recognition parameters can thus be exogenous as well as endogenous.

Let us consider a final alternative possibility: is dominance determined by the extent to which the dominant recognition parameter is found

⁴⁵ This issue of "exogenous" parameters resembles the philosophical concept of "complex equality" (Walzer 1983), which holds that inequalities within one sphere (i.c. ethnic background) may not spill over to other spheres (i.c. intellectual capabilities).

problematic? For example, many of the people to whom I present the results from the stereotype threat research (that is, how people's intellectual abilities are affected by ethnic background, but also by gender or socio-economic status (cf., among others, Kit et al. 2008; Spencer and Castano 2007)) are shocked, and find this to be a very problematic issue. However, being shocked or finding things problematic does not make a recognition parameter dominant. Not only is there a good chance that, in example 1, the reader nor the parents of the boy will find the boy's rejection problematic. Furthermore, it is just as likely that the boy himself will have forgotten about the incident only a few minutes later. Even if the girl's mocking smile had not aroused any sad feelings in the boy (so that he would not have found the rejection problematic), he still had been subject to a dominant social recognition game.

In conclusion, the three discussed dimensions (ascribed – achieved, exogenous – endogenous, problematic – unproblematic) may be instructive for determining the importance of the dominance, they nevertheless do not provide a criterion for dominance itself. As already emphasized, the sole commonality in the examples above is that actor X has no say in the dominant parameter. Actor X cannot escape certain recognition games and audiences, nor can he just pick and choose the recognition parameters within a particular recognition game.

5.3.2. Dominant recognition parameters

Having found that dominance cannot be defined univocally, it is worth to assess some particular aspects of dominant recognition games and the relevant recognition parameters: the reference group, the domain, and the audience.

Dominant social recognition games

In example 1 above, actor X (the boy) is involved in a social recognition game in which he did not choose to participate at that moment (being assessed on his looks). Once the audience (the girl) set eyes on actor X, the latter could not escape being part of a social recognition game. The boy could not "decide to disdain the play or postpone it," because the girl forced it on to him (Goffman 1969, p. 114). Particularly interesting in this example, is the fact that actor X's participation in the imposed game is triggered by a dominant audience. The boy did not choose to encounter this girl, but nonetheless he did. And, the encounter triggered an interaction between them, which instantly dragged him into a particular recognition game.

It should be clear, however, that a dominant recognition game does not require to be imposed by a dominant audience. Actor X may become involved in a dominant recognition game even if he freely selects the

audience to which he wants to present himself. In that case, the self-chosen audience assesses actor X (also) within a recognition game in which actor X did not choose to participate. For example, after the release of a new book, a writer might be disappointed with the media coverage because of over-abundant details about his personality, instead of merely covering information about his new book.

Neither is it the case that, if actor X is confronted with a dominant audience, this audience always imposes a dominant recognition game. It may be true that actor X willingly participates in a certain recognition game, but that he, within that game, is confronted with a dominant public. For instance, if actor X decides to become a politician, he cannot expect not to be assessed by the media and the general public. This last example is an obvious case of a recognition game with a dominant parameter. In general, all recognition games, whether dominant or not, have dominant parameters, since actor X can seldom, if ever, influence all game parameters with which his audience assesses him. This is what Goffman means when he says that situations in which people interact are "structured" [1969: 114] that is, there exist *game generated roles or identities* [1961: 26]. The remainder of this section discusses the three most relevant dominant parameters.

Dominant reference groups

Within reference group research, a prominent idea (cf., among others, Hyman 1968 [1942]; Festinger 1954; Shibutani 1955; Suls 1986) is that an audience by and large decides by itself to which reference group it compares actor X. Yet, it has been repeatedly confirmed that the situational context triggers one or more particular reference groups. In other words, a context imposes a dominant reference group. For instance, Merton and Rossi (1968 [1949]) find apparent patterns of reference groups: within military divisions, soldiers generally use the same reference groups to assess their situation, whereas between military divisions, these reference group patterns differ. This clearly indicates the impact of context on reference groups (also see, Hyman and Singer 1968, p. 13ff; Brickman and Bulman 1977; Clark and Senik forthcoming).⁴⁶ In addition, Wood (1989; 1996) convincingly demonstrates how reference groups are context dependent, and that they are often the result of automatic and even unconscious processes.

A dominant reference group was also clearly present in example 3 above. The audience (actor X himself) assesses actor X according to a reference

⁴⁶ The relevance of context allows scholars to formulate general (individual-independent) hypotheses about the outcomes of social comparison processes, which have been repeatedly confirmed. As an example, Pettigrew (1967, p. 264 original italics) cites one of these well-known hypotheses: "If a given social categorization is correlated with objective deprivation, relative deprivation will be more frequent among the deprived in the *more* favored category ... [and] relative gratification will be more frequent among the nondeprived in the *less* favored category".

group, which is subconsciously triggered by the context. The reference group in particular is the stereotype of which the audience believes actor X belongs to. Neither the audience, nor actor X selected this reference group. Nevertheless, the contextually imposed and even fictional reference group has a clear impact on the process of granting social recognition to actor X (also see Wood 1996, p. 522). What is remarkable in example 3 is that the imposed reference group not only influences the granting of social recognition, but it furthermore affects actor X's behavioral performance; which is witnessed in the "stereotype threat." This behavioral influence not only occurs when actor X is his own audience, as is the case in example 3. Stereotype confirming behavior can as easily be triggered by an audience which is external to actor X (cf. Snyder 2001).

Stereotypes are cognitive classification schemes available to a public to quickly (and often unconsciously (Bargh and Chartrand 1999, p. 465)) categorize others. The "thin slices of others" (Choi et al. 2005, p. 309) are assigned to a stereotype which is endowed with several social traits (i.e. social trait inference, cf. Uleman et al. (2005)) and the social recognition that comes with them (i.e. status attribution theory, cf. Della Fave (1980)).

In brief, dominant reference groups, such as stereotypes, are "powerful cultural scripts" (Chriss 2007, p. 3820): they play an important role in the granting (or not) of social recognition to actor X, and hence they also affect actor X's behavior. This again couples the reference group to the expectational norm. This expectational norm contains a wide set of acceptable behavioral strategies, which include many forms of non-acceptable behavior. For example, if actor X hopes to win positive social recognition during an academic conference, the strategies available to him exclude loud cursing, spitting on the ground, or attacking a speaker on personal rather than substantive grounds; all strategies which can yield social recognition, but not in an academic sub-culture.

Dominant domains

A dominant recognition domain is depicted in example 2 above: a scholar's publication record within an academic career. Currently, academic assessments importantly focus on a scholar's bibliographical record, whether the scholar likes it or not. In general terms: the dominant domain lies beyond actor X's selection control.

Closely related to this issue is the fact that social recognition games are primarily focused on visible (conspicuous) domains. This is of course due to the fact that social recognition requires that actor X is visible for his audience (or at least the features for which he wants to receive social recognition). Hence, the striving for social recognition takes place first and foremost in conspicuous games. A field in which the majority of research

is done regarding this claim is consumption of conspicuous goods (cf., among others, Veblen 1931 [1899]; Schor 1998; Frank 1999; Frijters and Leigh 2008; Charles et al. 2009).⁴⁷ It is generally found that people essentially value conspicuous goods to the extent that they signal one's social position, and hence yield social recognition. In short, within social recognition games, there is a dominance of conspicuous domains.

A feature that a dominant domain has in common with a dominant reference group is that actor X potentially has the option to exit the recognition game of which the domain or reference group is dominant. The academic scholar can apply for a job outside the academic world, and people can refuse to solve puzzles in a context that cues stereotypes (although this last option may be limited because stereotypes are often cued unnoticeable). This exit option is not always present in the next dominant recognition parameter: dominant audiences.

Dominant audiences

As mentioned above, example 1 above sketches an example of a dominant audience: the boy who rushes to the bakery merely bumps into the girl who gives him a mocking smile. Of course, the boy could have chosen to stay at home. Nevertheless, in ordinary life (thus excluding radical hermits), people do run into other people they did not choose to encounter. These others may be acquaintances or total strangers.

A point already mentioned is that a dominant audience may also impose a dominant recognition game, as in example 1. This occurs when actor X does not yet participate in the recognition game that that audience is observing. In this case, actor X cannot escape from this dominant audience. In contrast, within every recognition game in which actor X participates, actor X may be confronted with a dominant audience. In the latter case, actor X may step out of the recognition game to escape from the dominant public.

One particular instance of a dominant audience is the anonymous audience that we bump into on all kinds of occasions. Mostly, people as well as scholars neglect the impact which social recognition from anonymous passers-by might have for actor X. However, the literature finds that the opinion of the anonymous audience more strongly affects actor X when he is less self-certain about himself (Stapel and Blanton 2004, p. 477). Furthermore, the literature on (juvenile) crime and poverty culture suggests that the impact of the anonymous audience grows stronger as the social recognition it grants is more consistent (i.c. predominantly negative) and/or when actor X has few alternative recognition games to gain social recognition in (Barry 2006; Beavers 1965; Cohen 1964; Dolan 2007). In this respect, I hypothesize that

⁴⁷ Notwithstanding that the full connotation of "conspicuous good" is broader, it suffices to see here conspicuous goods as goods that are easily visible to an audience.

recognition from an anonymous audience is important for most people, but that this is only apparent in the feelings and behavior of people who receive for the most part negative recognition.

Another particular dominant audience, and probably the most important one, is one which even recluses are unlikely to escape from: the self, or the "I" as the audience of "me." When actor X runs into other people, they not only form an unsolicited audience for actor X, they also provide actor X with social relative information (their opinions (on actor X) as well as their appearance). Actor X's "I" automatically assesses this information about his "me." In this respect, Wood (1996, p. 523) finds that "people face information about others nearly constantly and [...] they may be forced to compare themselves, regardless of whether they desire comparisons."

Of course, actor X has several coping strategies at his disposal through which he can diminish the impact of dominant recognition games.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, coping takes place after the initial information did come in. In other words, coping reveals a situation of cognitive dissonance, i.e. holding incompatible beliefs simultaneously. As the dissonance becomes greater, it will be harder for actor X to uphold it (Festinger 1985 [1957], pp. 17-18). For example, as the external information about actor X runs more and more counter to the desired self-image of actor X, the external information will start to trickle down until the situation of cognitive dissonance is untenable. In other words, coping strategies do not shield actor X from being confronted with social comparisons he did not choose. They only shield him (to some extent) from the impact these dominant social comparisons have on him.

Intertwinement

A final remark on dominant recognition parameters is that, in real life, dominant recognition parameters are less separated than the analysis above might suggest. A dominant domain often goes together with a dominant reference group, just as a dominant audience easily imposes a domain and reference group on actor X. As it follows, dominant recognition parameters are often intertwined.

⁴⁸ Examples of coping strategies can be found in, among others, Cook and Curtin (1987), Gilovich (2002), Goethals (1986), Harris (1997), Miller & Flores (2007), and Smith et al. (1987).

6. The struggle for social recognition

As a summary of the final section of this paper, I consider why competition among people for social recognition often turns into an actual struggle.⁴⁹ In short, this is because social recognition is scarce, despite the plethora of theoretically potential recognition games. First, social recognition is inherently scarce, since it supposes actor X to stand out of the expectational norm. Second, not all potential recognition games are equally productive and hence people tend to group together in a limited number of social recognition games, and, within these games, they apply common strategies. Third, people do not always freely select the social recognition games in which they participate, nor all of the relevant parameters with which their audience assess them. For instance, a dominant audience often pins people down on a recognition game irrespective of their intention to participate in it or not; or people face dominant domains or expectational norms when entering a particular recognition game.

Taken these three factors together, that is, inherent, rational, and imposed scarcity, it is not hard to see that people's need for social recognition often turns into a competitive struggle. As an intuitive example, one may think of children striving for the recognition of a limited set of adults, for instance a teacher in the classroom or their parents at home. At least one purpose of the social recognition framework presented here was to make a reasonable case for this competition to occur among people who are striving for social recognition.

7. Conclusion

Evidence shows that a motive underlying many of people's behavior is the need for social recognition. This motive reveals itself both in avoiding negative recognition (being shamed) and in trying to achieve positive recognition (esteem). Taking these findings on social recognition as a starting point, I provide a conceptual framework that describes which actors and factors affect recognition driven social interactions. The analysis presented here is mainly based on a Goffmanian Game Theory approach, which is particularly apt to analyze the structure of social interactions. However, Goffman refrains himself from considering the underlying motivations for social interactions. Consequently, I supplement his approach with elements of the rational choice "economy of esteem" theory. The latter explicitly starts from the need people have for social recognition. Including these rational choice elements allows to observe scarcity and competition in social recognition games, and how these phenomena affect social interactions.

⁴⁹ For a philosophical analysis of the struggle for social recognition, see Honneth (1996).

Obviously, a summary can do no justice to the condensed framework that is presented above. Nevertheless, a few general points can be provided. First, a social recognition game consists of an actor X who tries to elicit social recognition from his audience, who therefore compares actor X with a reference group, which the audience considers as the expectational norm. Second, the multitude of social recognition games (they occur in every domain in life) involves an even greater multitude of game settings. For example, within one particular social recognition game: both the domain and the expectational norm which actor X associates with the game may differ from the domain and expectational norm with which the audience is in fact assessing actor X. Finally, despite its versatility, social recognition games involve a (sometimes fierce) competition between its competitors. Especially, the occurrence of dominant social recognition games or dominant parameters within recognition games elicit such competition, since they substantially limit the available strategies for actor X in striving for social recognition.

A caveat concerning the presented analysis is that it is limited to Western societies. Even though I believe that several of the elements in the framework can be translated into the language and habits of different cultures (cf., among others, Matsumoto et al. 1999; E. R. Smith and Mackie 2007, pp. 113-114; Zhao 2005), no such claim is made here. Furthermore, an issue which this paper does not touch upon is "group social recognition," that is, the social recognition which social and political groups hope to receive for them being a particular group (for example, cf. De Zwart 2005). It is to be expected that recognition processes similar to those described in this paper also take place on this meso-level, though this remains to be confirmed. For a fruitful application on (even) a macro-level, see Ringmar's (2002) analysis of the Cold War.

In addition to the fact that the conceptual framework presented here provides a clearer general understanding of how the need for social recognition affects social interactions, this framework is also constructive for future research. There it can be used (and tested) as a heuristic tool for the analysis of the impact of the need for social recognition on specific domains of social interactions. For example, one could think of economic well-being as a dominant social recognition game (whether people like it or not, others (in part) assess them on the basis of the car that they drive, the house they live in, the clothes they wear, etc.). Another relevant topic for further research is the hierarchy that exists between audiences. For example, is the social recognition from one's close family (always) more valuable than that of one's friends or colleagues? To sum up, the need for social recognition affects many social interactions, and the conceptual framework provided here allows for a better understanding, and further investigation of that process.

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