



Governance as Recognition in Social Work Management: a Critical Application of Charles Taylor's Philosophy

Dr. Kongbrailatpam Vidyarani

Assistant Professor, Philosophy Department, Waikhom Mani Girls' College

Laishram Kennedy Singh

Research Scholar, Philosophy Department, Manipur University

Dr.Sarat Sarma

Associate Professor, Philosophy Department,
DM college of Arts, Dhanamanjuri University

Abstract

Contemporary social work management is characterized by a profound tension between the instrumental imperatives of neoliberal governance standardization, metricization, and efficiency, and the profession's foundational ethical commitment to human dignity, relationship, and context. This paper argues that Charles Taylor's philosophy of the "politics of recognition" and the "dialogical self" provides a critical framework for diagnosing this tension as a systemic crisis of *misrecognition* and for reconceiving social work governance as a practice of institutional recognition. Through a critical conceptual analysis, this study posits that dominant managerialist models enact epistemic and ethical violence by flattening complex client and practitioner identities into homogenized categories of "cases" and "service units." In response, a Taylor-informed model of Governance as Recognition is proposed, founded on three pillars: (1) Governance as a *dialogical* rather than monological process, fostering a "fusion of horizons" between institution and community; (2) Leadership as the stewardship of a "social imaginary" centered on constitutive goods like dignity and relational integrity; and (3) Organizational structures designed to facilitate "strong evaluation" based on these goods, not merely instrumental outcomes.

Keywords: Charles Taylor, politics of recognition, social work management, governance, anti-oppressive practice

Introduction

Social work management occupies a fraught and paradoxical space. Charged with stewarding organizations dedicated to principles of social justice, self-determination, and human dignity, managers are simultaneously ensnared within governance structures overwhelmingly shaped by neoliberal logics of new public management (NPM). These logics prioritize quantifiable outcomes, cost-efficiency, standardized protocols, and risk mitigation, often translating complex human needs and relational practices into abstract, fungible data points (Baines, 2024; Healy, 2025). The result is a persistent and corrosive disconnect: the lived, identity-rich, and context-specific realities of clients, communities, and frontline practitioners are systematically misaligned with the administrative frameworks designed to serve and support them. This disconnect manifests as widespread moral distress among practitioners, inequitable service delivery, and the perpetuation of what can be termed *systemic misrecognition*.

This paper argues that Charles Taylor's philosophy offers a powerful critical lens for diagnosing this crisis and envisioning a transformative alternative. Taylor's seminal work on the "politics of recognition," the constitution of the "dialogical self," and the concept of the "social imaginary" provides a robust vocabulary to articulate the ethical deficits of current governance models (Taylor, 1994). His critique of instrumental reason and his articulation of human identity as formed through dialogical exchange within shared "horizons of significance" directly challenge the monological, transactional assumptions underpinning much contemporary management practice. Consequently, the central thesis of this paper is that applying Taylor's philosophy critically reconceives social work governance not as a neutral, technical function of oversight and control, but as the primary institutional site for the practice of recognition—a process essential for affirming the authentic identities of both service users and professionals, and for realigning organizations with their core moral purposes.

The argument will proceed as follows. First, a literature review will situate this inquiry within existing discourses on social work management, neoliberal governance, and the nascent application of recognition theory in human services. Second, the methodology of critical conceptual analysis will be outlined. The core of the paper will then present and discuss three interconnected arguments: (1) that dominant governance models perform *misrecognition* by imposing a monological managerialist social imaginary; (2) that Taylor's concept of the *dialogical self* mandates governance structures that facilitate a "fusion of horizons"; and (3) that *leadership* informed by Taylor's ethics is fundamentally the stewardship of an organizational horizon of significance through "strong evaluation." The conclusion will explore the practical implications for management practice and propose directions for future empirical research.

Literature Review

The colonization of social work by NPM principles is well-documented. Scholars like Baines (2024) argue that the "ethics of care" intrinsic to social work is in direct conflict with an "ethics of business," leading to de-professionalization and task-centered practice. Ferguson (2025) notes the rise of "digital governance," where predictive algorithms and client management systems further abstract and commodify need, creating a "data double" that may bear little resemblance to the person. This

body of work effectively diagnoses the symptoms of burnout, moral distress, and bureaucratic displacement of goals. However, it often lacks a deep philosophical framework to articulate the underlying *moral harm* beyond stress or inefficiency.

Social work has long drawn on philosophical traditions, from Kantian deontology to utilitarian consequentialism and virtue ethics (Banks, 2021). More recently, the ethics of care (Held, 2006) has gained prominence as a relational alternative. However, while care ethics emphasizes interdependence and response, Taylor's recognition theory provides a complementary and crucial focus on *identity* and *respect*. It addresses not just the act of caring, but the prior question of *who* is being recognized as a legitimate dialogical partner deserving of care. This bridges the micro-ethical encounter to the macro-political realm of institutional justice (Frost & Parton, 2023).

Axel Honneth's development of recognition theory has influenced some social work scholars, who have focused on love, rights, and solidarity as spheres of recognition (Garrett, 2022). However, Taylor's version, with its emphasis on the *dialogical construction of identity* and the *politics of difference*, is particularly apt for multicultural social work practice and managing diverse teams. In management studies, there is growing interest in "recognition leadership" and "identity-conscious governance," particularly in non-profit sectors (Lee & Cartwright, 2025). However, a systematic application of Taylor's entire philosophical corpus, including his ideas on social imaginaries and strong evaluation, remains underdeveloped, particularly in relation to the specific governance dilemmas of social work management.

Taylor's (1994) *Multiculturalism* and "The Politics of Recognition" argues that a person's identity is shaped by recognition or its absence, and that non-recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, imprisoning individuals in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. This connects to his earlier work in *Sources of the Self* (1989), which outlines how the modern self is constructed dialogically against a background of shared moral "horizons of significance." His later concept of the "modern social imaginary," the set of shared understandings that make common practices possible, explains how neoliberal governance becomes a taken-for-granted background reality (Taylor, 2004).

This paper seeks to bridge the gap between the critical sociology of managerialism (Baines, 2024; Ferguson, 2025) and the deep philosophical anthropology of Taylor (1994, 2004). It posits that Taylor's framework names the core injury of managerialism as *misrecognition* and provides the conceptual tools to design governance as an antidote, a project hinted at but not fully developed in recent work on ethical leadership in social services (Frost & Parton, 2023; Healy, 2025).

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative methodology of *critical conceptual analysis*, a form of inquiry prevalent in philosophical and theoretical social science. Its primary aim is not empirical generalization but the logical, analytical, and critical examination of concepts and their relationships to construct a strong theoretical argument. The "data" for this analysis consists of the key philosophical texts of Charles Taylor and the scholarly literature on social work management and governance.

The process involves three integrated phases:

Exegetical Analysis: A close reading of Taylor's core texts (*Sources of the Self*, *Multiculturalism*, *Modern Social Imaginaries*) to distil his central concepts, recognition/misrecognition, dialogical self, horizon of significance, social imaginary, strong vs. weak evaluation, and instrumental reason.

Critical Application: Systematically applying these concepts as analytical lenses to the domain of social work management and governance. This involves constructing "ideal types" of managerialist governance and a Taylor-informed alternative governance model. The critique identifies points of contradiction and harm (misrecognition) within current models.

Constructive Synthesis: Synthesizing Taylor's concepts into a coherent, prescriptive framework for "Governance as Recognition." This phase involves logical deduction from Taylor's philosophical premises to their necessary implications for leadership behavior, decision-making processes, board structure, and evaluation mechanisms within social work organizations. This methodological approach is appropriate because the research question is fundamentally conceptual and normative: it asks what governance *ought to be* based on a particular philosophical anthropology. It provides the depth and nuance required to move beyond superficial policy prescriptions and engage with the underlying moral architecture of social work organizations. The argument's validity rests on its internal coherence, its fidelity to Taylor's philosophy, its ability to illuminate and make sense of documented pathologies in the field, and its generation of plausible, actionable implications.

Discussion and Analysis

Argument 1: Managerialist Governance as a Structure of Systemic Misrecognition

A Taylorian analysis reveals that the dominant model of social work governance is not merely inefficient or stressful but is actively constitutive of *misrecognition*. This occurs through the imposition of a *managerialist social imaginary*. For Taylor (2004), a social imaginary is the broad, often inarticulate background understanding of how things work, which enables shared practices. The managerialist imaginary, now hegemonic in public and non-profit sectors, is characterized by a deep commitment to instrumental reason, the evaluation of all action primarily by its efficiency in achieving predetermined, often quantifiable, ends (Baines, 2024).

Within this imaginary, governance practices enact misrecognition in several interlocking ways. First, they impose a *monological* framework. Client identities, which are dialogically formed through complex intersections of culture, trauma, resilience, and community, are forced into the monological categories of intake forms, diagnostic codes (DSM-5), and eligibility criteria. The client's own narrative and self-understanding are often irrelevant to the administrative process; what

matters is their fit within pre-defined service buckets (Ferguson, 2025). This is a classic Taylorian misrecognition: the person is not seen in their authentic, dialogically formed specificity, but is reflected through a reductive, bureaucratic lens.

Second, this imaginary reduces professional practice. The social worker's complex judgment, relational skill, and ethical reasoning, their professional "horizon of significance" built on values like social justice and self-determination, are misrecognized as mere technical execution of evidence-based protocols. Performance is measured by throughput and documentation compliance, not by the quality of relational recognition offered to clients (Healy, 2025). This leads to what Taylor would call a "malaise" or moral distress, as practitioners are prevented from realizing the constitutive goods of their profession.

Third, governance becomes a practice of *weak evaluation*. Taylor (1989) distinguishes between strong evaluation (judging desires based on qualitative distinctions of worth, aligned with one's moral horizon) and weak evaluation (judging based on quantitative outcomes or desire fulfillment alone). Managerialist governance, focused on KPIs, outputs, and balanced budgets, entrenches weak evaluation as the primary mode of organizational judgment. A program is "good" if it meets its targets cost-effectively, regardless of whether it affirms client dignity or empowers a community. This systemic prioritization of the instrumental over the moral is the institutional engine of misrecognition.

Argument 2: The Dialogical Self and the Imperative for "Fusion of Horizons" in Governance

Taylor's (1994) concept of the dialogical self provides the philosophical foundation for an alternative model. If human identity is not monological but formed "through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal, with others," then any institution claiming to serve humans must itself become dialogical in structure. This moves governance beyond "stakeholder consultation," an often tokenistic process within a predetermined managerial agenda, toward a genuine *fusion of horizons*.

A fusion of horizons, for Taylor, is not agreement but the expansion of one's own understanding through a risky engagement with the different understanding of another. Applied to governance, this means the organization's strategic horizon (its mission, goals, methods) must not be set in the boardroom and then "sold" to the community. Instead, it must emerge from sustained, institutionalized dialogue where community members, clients, and frontline staff are recognized as full dialogical partners.

Operationally, this demands radical shifts in governance structure. It necessitates:

Co-Governance Models: Placing community representatives with full voting rights on boards and key committees, moving beyond advisory roles (Lee & Cartwright, 2025).

Participatory Budgeting and Planning: Facilitating processes where community members deliberate and make substantive decisions on resource allocation and program design.

Narrative and Deliberative Evaluation: Supplementing quantitative metrics with structured spaces for collective reflection on stories of practice, allowing qualitative goods like "dignity" or "empowerment" to be articulated and assessed communally. This dialogical turn transforms governance from a steering mechanism into a *meaning-making* process. The organization's purpose and methods are continually negotiated and re-authored in dialogue with those it serves, ensuring its practices remain responsive to their authentic, evolving identities and needs and thereby enact recognition at the systemic level.

Argument 3: Leadership as the Stewardship of an Organizational Horizon of Significance

If governance is to be reconceived as dialogical recognition, the role of leadership is fundamentally redefined. From a Taylorian perspective, the primary task of social work leadership, from frontline managers to executives, is not optimized administration but the *stewardship of the organization's horizon of significance*.

An organization's horizon of significance is its shared understanding of the constitutive goods that make its work meaningful and worthwhile. For a social work organization, these might include *relational integrity, justice, solidarity, and the affirmation of human dignity*. The leader's role is to protect, articulate, and animate this horizon in the face of the constant pressure from the managerialist imaginary to collapse everything into instrumental logic.

This stewardship involves *strong evaluation* at the organizational level. Leaders must consistently frame decisions, advocate for resources, and evaluate success not merely by "what works" (weak evaluation) but by "what is worthy," considering the organization's core goods (strong evaluation). For instance:

Advocacy & Resource Allocation: A leader justifies a culturally specific, labor-intensive program not because it is the most cost-effective, but because it is the only way to properly *recognize* the historical trauma and cultural identity of a particular community a constitutive good of the profession.

Managing Upwards: When reporting to funders or government bodies, a Taylor-informed leader translates the language of strong evaluation into compelling narratives and alternative metrics that demonstrate fidelity to recognition and dignity, challenging the dominance of purely instrumental reporting frameworks.

Internal Culture Building: The leader cultivates rituals, spaces for dialogue, and recognition-based HR practices that constantly remind the organization of its moral horizon, mitigating the alienating effects of bureaucratic tasks.

This model casts leadership as a profoundly philosophical and ethical practice. It requires moral courage, hermeneutic skill (to interpret and fuse horizons), and a commitment to keeping the question "What makes our work genuinely significant?" at the centre of organizational life. It is leadership as the guardian of the conditions necessary for recognition to flourish within and beyond the organization.

Conclusion

This critical application of Charles Taylor's philosophy argues that the central pathology of contemporary social work management is systemic misrecognition, enacted through governance models grounded in a monological, managerialist social imaginary. In response, the concept of Governance as Recognition offers a transformative framework. By centering the dialogical construction of identity, it demands governance structures that facilitate a genuine fusion of horizons with communities. By emphasizing strong evaluation, it redefines leadership as the stewardship of the profession's constitutive moral goods.

The implications for practice are significant. Organizations must audit their policies and procedures for "recognition gaps," invest in creating authentic dialogical spaces at the strategic level, and develop leaders with the philosophical literacy and moral courage to practice strong evaluation. This is not a call to abandon accountability, but to deepen it to hold organizations accountable to the full, dignified humanity of those they serve and those who serve.

Future research should move from conceptual analysis to empirical study. Promising directions include participatory action research projects co-designing and testing dialogical governance models in specific social work settings; phenomenological studies exploring whether practitioners in organizations with explicit "recognition-based" governance report lower moral distress and higher professional fulfilment; and discourse analyses of how leaders in such organizations navigate the tension between strong and weak evaluation in communications with external funders.

In an era of increasing technocratic control, applying Taylor's humanistic philosophy to social work management is an urgent ethical project. It provides the theoretical tools to resist the reduction of persons to data and to reclaim governance as a noble, meaning-making practice, a practice dedicated not to the management of cases, but to the recognition of selves.

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