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Commentary

Challenges for conceptualising otherness

Possibility Studies & Society
1–7
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DOI: 10.1177/27538699241233630
journals.sagepub.com/home/pst

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Abstract

Otherness is a deceptively simple concept. Ostensibly it refers to someone else, who is, in an ultimate sense, unknowable. But, there are many ways in which the self-other boundary is blurred. First, self is already other from the standpoint of the other. Second, in so far as perspective taking is possible, there is some otherness within the self, and some self within the other. Third, when people talk and think they routinely move between the perspectives of self and other, changing and shifting perspectives, and leveraging one perspective against the other. Overall, the core challenge for conceptualising otherness is that it does not exist without the self. Otherness is not 'in' the perspective of the other rather it is a two-sided relational quality that arises between the shifting perspectives of self and other.

Keywords
Dialogism, movement, other, otherness, perspectives

> He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that. (Mill, 1859, p. 104)

Streib (2023) draws on the writings of Waldenfels (2007, 2011) to argue that wisdom is xenosophia, namely, being open to radical otherness. Xenosophia is the opposite of xenophobia, which is the tendency to positively differentiate oneself from others. Specifically, Streib (2023, p. 10) argues for 'a reversal of perspectives', namely, 'the reallocation of the sovereignty of interpretation from the *self* onto the *other*'.

While such radical decentring of the self is laudable as an ethical act, as a route to social wisdom it is incomplete. If the self is fully relocated to the other, and the perspectives are completely reversed, then one ends up where one started – just with a different self. While I agree that ethics and wisdom begin with an engagement with otherness, the nature of this otherness, and where it is located, is challenging and needs unpacking.

Radical otherness

Waldenfels (2011) concept of 'the radical other' is deeply insightful. The term 'radical' is meant to identify that which is so alien to the self that it cannot be apprehended by the self. It is beyond expectation and experience. It demarcates the limits of the self; it is that which pre-exists the self, exists beyond the self, and will exist after the self is gone. He gives the example of birth:

> The birth concerns me, and yet I cannot attribute it to myself like an act that I myself have completed. Each birth is a premature one, and each infant is a latecomer, and this delay repeats itself whenever anything new that breaks through the existing measures comes into being (Waldenfels, 2011, p. 18)

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Birth exists as 'birth' for the parents – not the newborn. The birth is pre-imagined by the parents and filled with social significance; they are expectant. But, despite preparatory sensemaking, the child that arrives is radically other – and can never be fully assimilated by expectation, socialisation or education. Whenever there is such an intrusion of alterity there is an attempt to assimilate it; by naming, explaining and predicting it. As Waldenfels (2011, p. 31) writes: 'that which disturbs an order is integrated into this order by being named, classified, dated, localized, and subjected to explanations'. But, radical otherness can never be entirely integrated – because to domesticate it, to make sense of it and would be to strip it of its radical otherness.

The concept of radical otherness reminds us that we are neither the centre of the universe nor a point in the universe from which everything can be known. We are limited; the world is bigger than us and we can only ever know our own slice of it – on our own egocentric terms. Because of this inherent incompleteness, beyond our own experience, over the threshold of the other, lies an infinite and untapped well of potential insight.

Radical otherness can be differentiated from mundane otherness. If I ask someone 'what is the time?' and they respond '2pm', their response was (before I received the answer) beyond me. But, the response was not radically other because I expected such an answer. In contrast, radical otherness would be if the response was unexpected and incomprehensible. The answer might assume a conception of time that is Einsteinian (e.g. 'it depends on the frame of reference'), Nietzschean (e.g. 'the same time as the last time') or presentist (e.g. 'it is the only time that matters'). While such answers could, with a shift of cognitive frame, be understood; other answers, such as '42' (Adams, 2017), might never be comprehended.

In the terminology of Piaget (1977), we could say that radical otherness cannot be assimilated, rather it requires 'accommodation' – namely the cognitive system needs to change in order to understand it. Or, in the terminology of Bateson (1972), we could say that radical otherness requires 'double-loop learning' – namely changing the frame of the activity. But, the approaches of Piaget and Bateson also pose a challenge to any simplistic conception of radical otherness. Both Piaget and Bateson focused on development and learning through the encounter with otherness. So, how does radical otherness lead to learning, and if learning entails incorporating otherness into the self, then does it lose its radical quality?

For Piaget and Bateson what is accommodated (or requires double-loop learning) at time 1 only needs to be assimilated (or require single-loop learning) at time 2. From this developmental point of view, otherness is not stable but shifting. In the case of birth, where is the otherness of the baby when, after growing up, it learns from its parents about its own birth? Of course, this understanding will always be incomplete, but nonetheless, something on the boundary of otherness has changed. Radical otherness is simultaneously unbreachable, yet also ingested as part of learning. How can we conceptualise this traffic at the boundary of radical otherness?

The limits of xenosophia

Streib (2023) is right to focus on the upside of otherness: the potential for decentration, learning and wisdom. The social science literature has been too focused on the downside: xenophobia, othering, biases and conflict. But, fortunately conflict, denigration and othering are relatively rare. We learn from one another and grow through these interactions. The stranger can be a source of wonder, amazement and inspiration: in tourism, fiction and socialising people enjoy encountering otherness (Gillespie, 2006).

Ignoring otherness is unwise because each of us has an incomplete and often biased perspective (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010). The

experiences of others, their unique trajectories through space and time, contain their own and often valuable truths (Mead, 1932). The other has had experiences that we have not had, they have seen things we have not seen and thus they have developed understandings that we might not have. Thus, through our encounter with such otherness we broaden our own frame of reference, and potentially cover our own blindspots.

The insight provided by the other is illustrated in recent healthcare research. Although medical staff provide treatments for patients, and are positioned as experts vis-à-vis patients, it is increasingly evident that medical staff have blindspots (Gillespie & Reader, 2018). The trajectory of the patient is richer than any member of staff can appreciate or record in a medical file. The healthcare episode likely began before the medical staff were involved, and it continues when they are not there. From beginning to end, and through each consultation (often with a different expert), the only constant is the patient. Given this expertise in their own history, illness and trajectory, patients regularly correct medical files, prescription errors and misdiagnoses (Bell et al., 2022). The key point is that medical staff don't have the complete picture; they have blindspots, and healthcare professionals listening to patients can, to some extent, overcome their limited perspective in order to deliver safer care.

But, focusing on the value and potentiality of the perspective of the other should not come at the expense of losing one's critical faculties. Although there is much insight for medical staff to obtain by listening to patients, it would be unwise for them to become completely allocentric; the medical staff also have expertise that is necessary for a successful outcome.

Waldenfels (2007) emphasised that otherness has a 'sting', thus foregrounding the sometimes unsettling nature of the encounter with otherness. This sting of otherness can have two aspects. On the one hand, encountering radical alterity can pull us out of ourselves, and make us aware of our own biases, limitations and blindspots. Such a sting is beneficial, even if painful. But, on the other hand, one can encounter a radical alterity that is abhorrent, that challenges one's ethical principles, and sense of morality. While such a disturbing alterity can prompt us to new insight, such insight arises not through the radical otherness itself, but rather through our disagreement with it. Such a sting of moral disagreement reveals the limits of xenosophia, namely, that the other is just another limited self.

The concept of otherness, despite yielding much insight, conceals much complexity. While one might be tempted to say that the other is manifestly the other person (i.e. who is distinct from me), I aim to show that even this distinction between self and other is not clear-cut. Moreover, when one brings in the dynamic processes of how we learn through our encounter with otherness, the distinction between self and other needs to be understood as dynamic. In what follows, I identify three challenges for conceptualising otherness.

Self is already other (from the standpoint of the other)

The terms 'self' and 'other' designate relative frames of reference. The canonical 'other' is the person I am interacting with (in this case you). The temptation is for both of us to equate the term 'self' with ourselves. Thus the 'other' for me is you, but, for you it is me. Any self is, from the standpoint of the other, the other. Thus, in one sense, self and other are the same. In so far as one holds fast to one frame of reference, the gulf between self and other can seem insurmountable. But, once one allows for shifting frames of reference, then the distinction between self and other can become blurred.

Even within a fixed frame of reference the boundary between self and other is not clear-cut. First, there is the other-within-self (Marková, 2016), namely, what self thinks other thinks. From a dialogical standpoint, the self is populated with the voices of many others (Wertsch, 1991). These voices of the other

within self can be disagreed with and perceived as genuinely other (e.g. the views attributed to an outgroup), nevertheless, they are part of the self. Second, there is self-within-other. In so far as other people know us well, then there is likely a voice of us around in their internal dialogues. As James (1890) wrote, the self is distributed into all the people and groups who know us, and carry an image of us around in their heads. Thus, the boundary between self and other is not demarcated by the skin (Farr, 1997); the other is within self, and the self is within the other.

This messiness of the ostensibly simple self-other distinction causes problems for naïve xenosophia, or allocentrism. Does xenosophia mean engaging with the alterity within myself or beyond myself? Or, if it means rebuilding knowledge from the standpoint of the other, from their frame of reference, then does it mean replacing one self with another self, and if so, what is the gain? The challenge is that the most radical form of allocentrism risks collapsing into egocentrism, albeit within a new frame of reference.

Radical otherness includes part of the self

Otherness, as that which is beyond the boundary of the self, has two conceptually distinct aspects. At the broadest level, the other simply exceeds me. Their knowledge, experience and feelings can never by fully understood by me – there will always be a residue of incomprehension. But, within this excess of the other there is a subset that is deeply personal to me, namely, the surplus meanings that I have for the other that I am not aware of (i.e. how they view me). I will term these two aspects 'excess' and 'surplus'.

The concept of excess was extensively developed by Levinas (1991). This is the idea that the other always exceeds me. Not only do they know things that I don't know, due to their own unique trajectory through space and time, but, even within a shared moment they will have experiences and feelings that I can never fully understand or participate in. There is always a part of their experience that is not only beyond me, but also sometimes, beyond language, communication and participation. Broadening the concept of excess, one could even argue that the natural world also exceeds any human conception (Feyerabend, 2001). The world as it is for itself (not for us) is beyond total understanding (Gillespie et al., 2024). The key idea of excess is reminds us of the limits of our own understanding.

The concept of surplus has been used to refer to the subset of the excess of the other that pertains to self (Bakhtin, 1923; Gillespie, 2003). Bakhtin gives the concrete metaphor of the other person being able to see the back of my head – which I cannot see unaided. The back of my head is part of me, but it exists in the mind of the other. At a more semantic level, other may see things in us, both blindspots and virtues, that are not salient to us. These surplus meanings were produced by us, in the mind of the other, but, they are unknown to us. Surplus meanings are routinely evident in feedback processes (e.g. education, evaluations, complaints). Moreover, these processes reveal that these surplus meanings are often moving, being returned to the self, sometimes stimulating learning and at other times defensiveness.

The fact that other perspectives exceed my own, and the fact that some of these perspectives have surplus meanings about me, would be uninteresting if there could be no transaction between perspectives. If the excess and surplus were fixed, if there were no way to get some of them into self's perspective, then their mere existence would be interesting but inconsequential. The challenge is not radical otherness per se, but rather, how we interact with, and learn through, otherness.

Integrating this distinction between excess and surplus with the prior point about self and other being relative frames of reference, it follows that not only does the other exceed me, but I exceed the other; not only does the other have surplus meanings about me, but, they have surplus meanings for me. The challenge is to

conceptualise this interaction not from one side or the other, but from both sides simultaneously. Only by conceptualising the dynamic interplay of excess and surplus on both sides of the self-other interaction can we begin to full understand the generative, critical and value-creating potential of encountering otherness.

Beyond self or other: Towards self and other

There is an ambiguity in radical otherness: it is simultaneously beyond the self and incorporated into the self. Radical otherness can be partially domesticated, and in so doing, it can lead to an expansion of the self (i.e. learning). But, radical otherness can never be completely domesticated, there will always be some excess that escapes us. Thus, there is both otherness that is forever beyond us, and also some aspect of this otherness that is partially (albeit incompletely) domesticated and ingested.

Let us return to Waldenfels (2011) example of the baby being born. First the newborn is for others and only later for itself. The birth happens to the baby (and there are many parts of its experience that exceed the parents). The baby, in being born, creates surplus meanings for the parents that it is not aware of and which exceed it. But, the perspectives of the baby and parent are not fixed: as the child grows up and interacts with the parents, it may become aware of its own birth from the standpoint of the parents. The surplus meanings created by the birth for the parents (e.g. expectations, fears, joys, family significance) will to some extent, be returned to the child, such that they will, to some extent, be able to participate in those meanings. Thus, the boundary of radical otherness is not static; there is traffic across the boundary, and this is the basis of learning.

The conceptual challenge is that the otherness 'out there' becomes otherness 'within'. The human mind, from this standpoint, reflects (albeit imperfectly) the many perspectives that it interacts with and is embedded within. The voice of the parents is within the child, to which are added the voices of friends, teachers and the rest of society (Martin & Gillespie, 2010). This is not to say that the perspectives of society within the individual are accurate, only to say that the otherness becomes refracted into the developing mind, creating the very possibility for human thought – as the movement of the mind *between* perspectives.

Streib (2023) insightfully identifies the importance of perspective taking in the encounter with otherness. A key feature of perspective taking is that one can take many perspectives simultaneously – indeed, social understanding is arguably an integration of many perspectives (i.e. the generalised other; Mead, 1934). The shifting of self-other frames of reference, discussed above, is not peculiar to social scientists. Routinely, people think and act from the standpoint of other perspectives. We tell stories from the standpoint of protagonists, we bluff from the standpoint of our opponent, and we speak from the standpoint of our audience (Rommetveit, 1974). In short, we move between the perspectives of self and other.

At the heart of Streib's (2023) proposal is replacing an egocentric approach (thinking of the other from the standpoint of the self) with an allocentric approach (starting thinking from the standpoint of the other). But this question about which perspective to adopt (self or other) overlooks our ability to move between perspectives. Given the fact that every perspective is incomplete (with biases and blindspots), and given the fact that every perspective has unique value (excess and surplus), arguably, the only way to avoid egocentrism it to move between perspectives.

> The knowable world is incomplete if seen from any one point of view, incoherent if seen from all points of view at once, and empty if seen from nowhere in particular. Given the choice between incompleteness, incoherence, and nothingness, I aim to stay on the move, and seek out and engage with multiple points of view (Shweder, 2003, p. 45)

To abandon ones own 'egocentric' perspective for the perspective of the other could be unwise. What if the other is even more egocentric?

Maybe they are engaging in othering? What if their views are abhorrent and deserve criticism? It is only if we 'stay on the move', by leveraging one perspective against another, and thus not taking any perspective for granted, that we can develop a richer social understanding.

All perspectives are incomplete, all have blindspots and biases; there is no single perspective which is transcending. Accordingly, the only solution to this challenge is to replace the idea of one perspective with many. Social understanding comes not only from understanding 'the other', but from integrating many, potentially contradictory, perspectives. In this sense, being able (to some extent) to take an allocentric point of view is only the first step to wisdom; it is being able to move between perspectives, empathise with them, but also criticise them, that is the crucial second step.

Taking this idea of moving between perspectives further, it is also a potential basis for possibility. Possibility entails thinking about alternatives, what might be, or what could become (Glăveanu, 2023). Such thinking, does not come from one perspective or another, instead it grows in the space between perspectives (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015). Possibility arises every time we encounter otherness; in otherness is an alternative, another potential self. But, the potential is lost is self is collapsed into the other.

Conclusion

The opening quote by Mill (co-authored with his wife in all but name; 1859, p. 104), that a person who knows only their 'own side of the case, knows little of that', is insightful not simply because it puts the emphasis on the other, but, because it holds both the perspectives of self and other at the same time. We learn about ourselves not through decamping to the other, but, through being self and other at the same time. To fully adopt the perspective of the other would be to make no progress, because, one would not know the other side of the case. It is only by holding onto one's own perspective and simultaneously adopting other perspectives that a fuller understanding emerges.

The value of the other is unlocked, not by wholly embracing their perspective to the exclusion of alternatives, but, by juxtaposing this alien perspective with competing perspectives; finding possibility in the in-between. This idea of clashing perspectives takes us to the heart of conceptualising otherness. There can be no otherness in a world of only one perspective. Otherness is not a property of this or that perspective. Otherness is a two-sided relational concept arising out of the difference between perspectives.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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