The hybrid stranger and intercultural hermeneutics

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The category of the stranger has experienced a renaissance in contemporary social theory. Within this burgeoning literature, a new conceptualisation has emerged which can be categorised as the ‘in-between stranger’ or the ‘hybrid of modernity’. The formulation of this stranger has raised epistemological concerns. Not only can the hybrid stranger expose the misunderstanding between Self and Other or between two life-worlds, it is able to transcend the self/other dichotomy. The unresolved hermeneutic problem - the meeting with strangers - results in uncertainty, in particular uncertainty about how to read and respond to unfamiliar social situations. What is interesting is not the fact that misunderstanding occurs between the host and the stranger, but that the stranger’s physical nearness and social distance fosters an interpretative view of the world that is not accessible to either the host (Self) or the minority group (Other). The position of hybrid strangers purportedly encourages a critical and ‘objective’ stance that transcends conventional and ‘situated’ knowledge. The discourse on ‘the stranger’, beginning with Simmel, has constructed the hybrid stranger as disinterested third party. This in-between, third position allows hybrid strangers to see things more clearly and/or differently than those occupying opposing positions or cultural perspectives. In this paper I critically examine the nature of this third type of consciousness and its association with the idea of the intercultural.

The Stranger and Strangeness

The work of Georg Simmel (1964) and Zygmunt Bauman (1988-89, 1995a & 1995b) have been at the forefront of developing a social theory of the stranger. It is in their work that we see the development of and the distinction between the sociological stranger and the idea of strangeness. In sociological theory the ideas of the ‘stranger’ and ‘strangeness’ have lacked conceptual clarity. A first step towards this clarification is to clearly differentiate the category ‘stranger’ from the idea ‘strangeness’: the former describes a sociological category while the latter depicts a spatial process. The sociological conception of the stranger is a generic term which usually refers to individuals who are socially, culturally or racially different. In postcolonial studies, cultural studies and migration studies the sociological stranger is
usually refers to the Other. Occasionally the Other and the stranger are understood as synonymous terms and refer to the excluded, repressed, suppressed or concealed. This repression and exclusion is done by the dominant host Self. Past work on the sociological Other have constituted this Other as a victim, and a passive subject lacking in agency. The 'postmodern turn' in cultural and migration studies, however, has seen a reconstitution of the essentialist post-colonial and migrant subject.

For Simmel, strangeness highlights a spatial dimension involving proximity and distance between social actors. Strangeness results in a contradictory experience in which the participants of social interaction are spatially near, yet socially or culturally remote. Strangeness in its spatial dimension, however, is not confined to social interaction between different cultural groups. In other words, experiencing spatial strangeness does not necessarily make one a sociological stranger. For example, listening to music on one's iPod, playing with one's mobile phone or reading on public transport can be interpreted as an incident of spatial strangeness: one is socially separate and isolated in one's own world but physically close to others. Listening to music or reading signifies to others the choice of isolation and the construction of a private sphere. Privacy - due to the ever increasing use of new technologies - has blurred the distinction between the private and public world. Urban strangers - as Simmel once remarked - are over-stimulated by the external world and reading, iPods and mobile phones are a means by which we cope with this external stimuli.

In the essay on the stranger Simmel puts forward another conception of strangeness which has largely been ignored in the literature. One dimension of this second type alludes to a sense of loss: the loss of uniqueness/difference when confronted by one's underlying commonality. Simmel uses the example of first love to demonstrate what he calls this 'trace of strangeness'. The couple imagine that their love is unique only to discover that their experience of first love, and its associated feelings, is in fact universal. One could have had that same experience with another partner thus making this relationship a universal rather than particular/unique condition. The second way in which a trace of strangeness enters social interaction is when a group rejects or denies its similarities or commonalities when confronted by difference. This latter form, according to Simmel, is captured in the relationship between the Greeks and the Barbarians because the Greeks denied that there was a common humanity connecting the self and the Other.

Strangeness is thus a spatial dimension and a condition in which the tension between commonality and difference are played out.

The Sociological Stranger and a third type of consciousness
Simmel’s work on the sociological stranger has led to a discussion on the stranger’s intellectual disposition. Sociological strangers are conceptualised as non-members. They are the cultural strangers who, in most cases, are excluded and marginalized from what is usually represented as the ‘in-group’ or ‘native group’. Being a stranger, at least for Simmel, is epitomised in the life of Jews, gypsies, merchants and wanderers. Strangers, however, occupy an important social and cultural space because they are neither friends nor enemies: they are the in-betweens or what Bauman calls the ‘hybrids of modernity’ (Bauman 1991). They disturb all classifications. They destabilise dualistic thinking. The hybrids of modernity are the bane of modernity’s will to order.

Strangers may attempt to assimilate into the host group but they find it difficult to do so because they do not share the taken-for-granted basic assumptions or world-view of the host members. Consequently, a stranger becomes essentially a person who questions nearly everything that is taken for granted by members of the host group. This discrepancy results in a hermeneutical problem; strangers cannot assume that their interpretation of the new cultural pattern coincides with that of the members of the in-group. It is this very gap which constitutes them as strangers (Bauman 1995a: 126).

The in-between sociological strangers, who are physically close but socially distant, raise epistemological issues because they highlight the misunderstanding between Self and Other or between two life-worlds. This unresolved hermeneutic problem - the meeting with strangers - results in uncertainty, in particular uncertainty about how to read and respond to social situations. Consequently, the sociological stranger does not have complete access to the cultural and language code of the host. But this very lack is the stranger’s strength.

What is pertinent here is not that misunderstanding occurs between the host and the stranger, but that the experience of strangeness in which one is both near and far encourages an interpretative view of the world that is not accessible to either the self and other because both are confined within their epistemological prison.

The in-between hermeneutical position

This tentative association between the hermeneutical project and the position of the stranger can be found in the work of the phenomenological sociologist, Alfred Schutz (concerned with everyday life and the life-world). Schutz’s argues that “strangeness and familiarity are not limited to the social field but are general categories of our interpretation of the world” (Schutz 1964 (1944): 105). Strangeness becomes an intellectual stance towards the world. Gadamer’s exposition of the hermeneutical project in his now famous
text, *Truth and Method* is also suggestive of the stranger’s ability to be both close and distant. In other words, the stranger’s experience of closeness and distance can be translated into a broader interpretive stance to the social world. I am not suggesting that Gadamer’s hermeneutical project can only be read through the lenses of the stranger. Rather, the experience of the in-between stranger fosters a hermeneutical stance towards the social world that parallels Gadamer’s description of the hermeneutical stance towards a text.

In *Truth and Method*, the connection between strangeness and interpretation is explicitly made. Gadamer notes that it is the interplay of familiarity and strangeness when approaching a text which is at the heart of hermeneutical practice (Gadamer 1997 (1960): 295). It is simultaneously the text’s strangeness and familiarity to us or the play “between being a historically intended, distanciated object and belonging to a tradition” which suggests to Gadamer that “the true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between” (Gadamer 1997 (1960): 295). It is this “intermediate position”, a position which the stranger as ‘the third’ has traditionally adopted in the sociological literature, which can clarify the conditions in which ‘true’ understanding is achieved.

The position of strangers encourages a critical and ‘objective’ stance towards the host and parent culture. This stance transcends conventional and ‘situated’ knowledge. The literature on ‘the stranger’, beginning with Simmel, has constructed this individual type as disinterested third party. This in-between, third position allows strangers to see things more clearly and/or differently than those who occupy opposing cultural perspectives.

Strangers also adopt a different type of objectivity not associated with positivism and the so-called neutrality of the scientific method. They dialectically adopt a frame of mind which could be categorized as a ‘subjective objectivity’ in which one is both detached and involved, both remote and near (Simmel 1964: 404). Strangers have a “bird’s-eye view” and are not immersed in the particularities of the opposing parties or cultural groups. This ‘bird’s-eye view’ allow strangers to adopt the particular views of the opposing parties, but be adequately detached from both parties to identify their underlying common or universal interests. Strangers, for Simmel, are involved universalistic and particularistic practices. They may experience a commonality which denies their uniqueness but cannot always escape their uniqueness and/or difference when it is imposed on them by others.

**Interculturality, the stranger and intercultural hermeneutics**

The idea of intercultural hermeneutics involves a theory and method of understanding that occurs across cultural boundaries. It includes a willingness and one would assume an ability to cross boundaries which could lead to a “double belonging” (Ariarajah, 2005: 95. *Intercultural Hermeneutics – A Promise for the Future*, *Exchange,*
In the field of intercultural communication there has been an attempt to marry Gadamer's hermeneutical project with the discipline of intercultural communication. Scholars in this field have argued that an intercultural communication researcher should have the following skills: be able to move from particularity to universality, have an affinity with the unfamiliar and appreciate difference, be open to alternatives, transcend the narrow concerns of the group and move beyond the tribal to the universal needs of humanity, and be sensitive to the unity and diversity of the human condition (Roy and Starosta, 2001: 16, Language and Intercultural Communication, vol.1, no. 1, pp. 6-20). Interculturality or the intercultural attitude – especially as it is expressed through the emerging discipline of intercultural philosophy is characterized by impartiality, the promotion of tolerance towards difference; and it is non-universal and non-essentialist in its philosophical stance. It is also linked to an anti-particularistic and non-monolithic reasoning. To be intercultural is to resist universalizing, while acknowledging the particular in a non-essentialist manner (Mall, 1998: 20-21, Philosophy and Philosophies – Cross-culturally Considered, Topoi, vol.17, pp. 15-27). Finally, Richard Bernstein in a paper on incommensurability and otherness argues for an approach to the Other that echoes an intercultural hermeneutics. Bernstein argues for the development of an intercultural imagination in which "we are sensitive to the sameness of "the Other" with ourselves and the radical alterity that defies and resists reduction of the "the Other to "the Same". (Bernstein, R. J. (1991). Incommensurability and Otherness Revisited. Culture and Modernity: East-West Philosophic Perspective. E. Deutsch. Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press: 85-103).

Adopting an intercultural hermeneutic stance resonates with some of the characteristics of the in-between stranger. The sociological literature written on marginal individuals or outsiders over the 20th century reinforces the epistemological advantage of being a social and cultural in-between. The cultural hybrid, who adopts the role of the stranger, "becomes, relatively to his cultural milieu, the individual with the wider horizon, the keener intelligence, the more detached and objective viewpoint" (Park 1937: 376) and hybrid individuals are less nationalistic because they "look across national boundaries" (Park 1934: 137). This alternative epistemology and perspective is not available to those immersed in the world-view of either the established or the outsider. In these accounts of strangers the description is not limited to an individual type, rather distance and proximity are general features of our interpretation of the world (Schutz 1964 (1944): 105). This interpretative stance to the world is 'intercultural' because it is able to move between the particular and the universal. Mobility, specifically intellectual mobility, is a key feature of the intercultural position.
The problematics of the third position

Is such a third position – a dwelling between the insider and outsider perspective, between the local and global, between the particular and universal – possible? Such a position may possible but not in terms of how the hybrid stranger is theorized.

The sociological discourse on the stranger and its association with intercultural hermeneutics raises interesting questions about the politics of representation and experience. Can occupying this in-between third position allow one to better represent the interest of Others and one’s own culture? According to the discourse on the sociological stranger the answer is yes because both the host and parent culture are confined within their epistemological framework/prison.

The hybrid stranger can synthesize and have access to a ‘total perspective’ not available to those immersed in their particular/local or global/universal frameworks. Hybrid strangers are able to transcend ‘standpoint epistemologies’. Due to their flexibility and mobility they develop a ‘double perspective’ or “double belonging” which encourages an alternative mode of thinking unavailable to those who are fixed within their particularistic or universalistic framework. Hybrid strangers have the intellectual mindset to float between the local and the global, between the particular & the universal and thus become detached from the politics of location.

Although hybrid strangers are able to transcend standpoint epistemologies, I want to suggest that the in-between perspective collapses into another standpoint. In other words, while the role of the hybrid stranger can be closely associated with the stranger’s ability to be both distant and close, to be subjective and objective, hybrid strangers are not devoid of prejudice in their understanding of the social world. Gadamer argues that interpreters are not totally in control of the interpretative process because the prejudices and fore-meanings that constitute the interpreters’ consciousness are not at their disposal. In Gadamer’s words, the interpreter “cannot separate in advance the productive prejudices that enable understanding from the prejudices that hinder it and lead to misunderstanding” (Gadamer 1997 (1960): 295).

Hybrid strangers may find it difficult to be free-floating because they are embedded in the prejudices – in the hermeneutical sense – of their empirical social world. The perspective of the hybrid stranger assumes that they are not affected by prejudices because they are not confined to either the insider/outsider or local/global perspective. This ignores the fact that hybrid strangers are embedded; they are historical beings who are immersed in the attitudes, values and prejudices of their time and place. They do not occupy a boundless social and cultural vacuum.

The epistemological position of the hybrid stranger is not devoid of prejudices and fore-meanings because it is these very same prejudices and fore-meanings that define who we are. Hybrid strangers are not ahistorical social actors who float above those who
are socially and historically located. Social actors, and their understanding of the world, are formed in the context of customs, traditions and prejudices – even if these are seen to be socially constructed. The idea of the hybrid stranger assumes that one’s historical, social and cultural position can be placed on hold when analyzing the social world of others.

It is the ability to bracket off one’s values and norms that allows hybrid strangers an alternative view of social reality not available to insiders and outsiders. On the contrary, one’s cultural horizons, prejudices and ‘standpoints’ both contribute and hinder the process of understanding.
However, Gadamer argues that the interpreters are not totally in control of the interpretative process because the prejudices and fore-meanings that constitute the interpreters' consciousness are not at their disposal. In Gadamer's words, the interpreter "cannot separate in advance the productive prejudices that enable understanding from the prejudices that hinder it and lead to misunderstanding" (Gadamer 1997 (1960): 295). The in-betweenness of the hermeneutical practice means that the temporal distance which historicism tries to overcome in order to acquire historical objectivity is beyond reach. Understanding, according to one reading of historicism, is achieved when we transpose ourselves into the period under study and think with its thoughts and ideas, not with our own. In contrast, Gadamer argues that one should recognize temporal distance as a productive and positive condition that enables understanding. This understanding is filled with the continuity of custom and tradition of which we are part and from which we can never fully escape. Understanding is the result of the dialectic between proximity and distance and these spatial dimensions are inseparable in the hermeneutical process. Temporal distance — which refers to the fact that our prejudices are transcended - is immediately questioned when we encounter the Other — proximity. The Other provokes or makes conscious the interpreter's prejudices and in so doing allows one's consciousness to be affected by history. Gadamer believes that we are historical beings, where self-knowledge is never complete (1997 (1960): 302). The in-between or intermediate position also encompasses the idea of "horizons". A horizon refers to all that is seen from a particular vantage point (proximity) and also means "not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it (distanciation)" (1997 (1960): 302). The hermeneutical situation and historical understanding does not merely refer to discovering and fully understanding the Other's standpoint and horizon because, for Gadamer, horizons are not closed or fixed.

The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never absolutely bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon. The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves us (Gadamer 1997 (1960): 304).

Horizons refer to the hermeneutical condition in which we overcome our own and the Other's particularity (proximity) and arrive at a "higher universality" (distanciation) (Gadamer 1997 (1960): 305). According to Gadamer, horizons, and the in-betweeness that it fosters, allows the interpreter to see "better" what is close at hand and to contextualize it "within a larger whole and in truer proportion" (Gadamer 1997 (1960): 305). In other words, the hermeneutical practice adopts a particular epistemological stance that dialectically
intertwines proximity and distanciation and arrives at a ‘better’ and ‘truer’ understanding of social reality. This third position, and the hermeneutical stance it adopts, has been historically associated with the free-floating intellectual.