

The Self, the Other, and the International Student

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ABSTRACT

A sense of strangerhood, which is different from social isolation or cultural alienation, is common among many of the international students whom I encounter. In a world increasingly preoccupied with personal interaction and social exchange, many of these students perceive strangerhood as problematic and inherently negative. This brief reflection considers strangerhood from the perspective of Georg Simmel and argues that being a stranger has considerable positive value. Recognition of strangerhood is a critical element in developing a greater understanding of both the self and the Other. Legitimizing the experience of strangerhood, emphasizing its potential value, and empowering students to embrace it may provide significant short- and long-term benefits for international students in their personal and transformative journeys.

Keywords: Difference, identity creation, logic of opposition, perpetual journeys, personal transitions, relationships.

Strangerhood is a constant dimension of my mentoring practice with international students in Prague. More accurately, these are transnational students – that is, foreign nationals studying at the International Program of an accredited American college in Prague. The situation is culturally more complex: most of my students are not Czechs, but have come from Russia, Eastern Europe, and the Central Asian countries of the former USSR. As such, many are making social and cultural adjustments not only to their American learning environment but also to the national culture of the Czech Republic.

Most of my students tell me that they feel like strangers in a strange land. They do not mean that they have not adjusted culturally to their surroundings – by and large they have, and they are well able to navigate the new context within they find themselves. Nevertheless, they still regard themselves as strangers and know that they are perceived as such by those around them. These students often talk of distance and separation. In a paradoxical life-world – where increased globalization has sparked nationalism, growing migrant mobility has fueled xenophobia, and a preoccupation with social engagement has spurred narcissistic self-preoccupation – it is perhaps not unexpected that strangers and the state of strangerhood are perceived negatively, and these international students certainly sense the negativity. Feelings of strangerhood are strong in the student’s first year of study, but they persist in differently-expressed ways throughout the four-year academic program. These are not constructive feelings, or at least students do not regard them as such. They are usually associated with a sense of isolation, alienation, and of being on the periphery of something that cannot be entered. These feeling are neither unusual nor idiosyncratic; indeed, they seem to a fairly common element of the international student experience (Sakurai, McCall-Wolf, & Kashima, 2010; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008).

Being a stranger is relational – it only comes about through opposition with the *Other*. The stranger assumes that those who constitute the Other have a high degree of cohesion and relatedness. This is rarely true; in fact, it is the contrasting presence of the stranger that actually defines and solidifies the Other’s identity. As Pietsch and Marotta (2009) observe, “the Self’s identity is constituted through its opposition to the Other, that is, where identity is subject to a differential logic of opposition in order to establish difference” (p. 188). From the other side of the divide the Other often finds strangers confusing, not to say disconcerting, because they “befog and eclipse the boundary lines which ought to be clearly seen” (Bauman, 1997, p. 17).

It is this *differential logic of opposition* that is most important for international students to recognize. Strangerhood is not an inherent property – positive or negative – of the individual. It is an experienced relational difference, and within this experienced difference we can learn more about ourselves, just as the Other can better define his or her own identity. Being recognized as a stranger – by both the individual and the Other – provides a starting point for exploring difference. It provides an opportunity to compare, contrast, and develop a growing discernment about how we are different, and from what we are different. This is likely what Georg Simmel (1950) had in mind when he claimed that “to be a stranger is naturally a very positive relation; it is a specific form of interaction” (p. 402).

Simmelian strangers appreciate a simultaneously nearness and remoteness from the Other that unburdens them from the familiarity of previous interactions and speculation about future relationships. Simmelian strangers are engaged in a process of perpetual transition. They are not permanently located in their origins, nor do they seek incorporation in the places through which they pass. They recognize and accept their social and cultural dislocation. They know that their lack of fixity provides the Other with the opportunity to reach a more considered, albeit less confident, appreciation of integration. Reflecting on Simmel's work, some have concluded that our social and cultural lives are never fully understood or fixed "because spatial and temporal gaps indicate that man [sic] is always in the state of *being in between*. Distance is always a double structure (distance) between two positions.... social action is always *between* and never *within*" (Škorić, Kišjuhas, & Škorić, 2013, p. 592).

So, when my students point to the isolation and the pain of being strangers, I encourage them to refocus on the virtues inherent in the state of strangerhood. It is normal that they feel strangers. They are estranged by a different language. They are estranged socially in the classroom and culturally in the café. They are recognized as strangers – occasionally in a xenophobic sense, more often in a positive sense where they contribute to self-questioning of the Other who has been encountered. One of the great opportunities presented by international education – an opportunity all too often neglected by students and their faculty – is engaging with that which is different and strange and, in doing so, embracing the perspective of the stranger. It is transformative for students to appreciate that strangerhood is not something that they possess, but that it is part of a relational process with otherness, that "the relationship with the 'other' is not an external relationship, but structures one's identity from within. I am who I am only in relation to the Other, and this sense of difference prevents me from claiming that my existence is whole or complete" (Kostogriz & Doecke, 2007, p. 7).

I appreciate that the educational journeys my students have embarked upon are complex and often strangely serendipitous. When prompted they talk about these journeys in pragmatic ways: the benefits of an international education in the global workplace, the advantages of learning in an academic environment where questioning and discovery are encouraged, and the opportunity of perfecting their English language competencies. They have come to study in Prague for all of these reasons. They insist that it is only a temporary sojourn and that they will return to their native countries, or will seek postgraduate opportunities in more distanced ones. But in their writings and reflective journals most of my students concede that strangerhood is ever-present and decidedly complex (Starr-Glass, 2014). How can we guide them?

- **Recognize the legitimacy of strangerhood.** Strangers meet as people, with origins and legitimacies not marginalized by place or history. Transnational students opted, perhaps unwittingly, for strangerhood when they engaged with a different educational culture in a different country. They are strangers and have a legitimate claim on their strangerhood, just as they have a claim to be recognized as unique persons – not as exotic visitors, or the incidental flotsam of an impersonal and globalized system of education (Kim, 2009).
- **Permit students to value their strangerhood.** Strangerhood has value for the stranger and the Other. This potential value needs to be explained, communicated, and reinforced. Rather than lose the opportunities of strangerhood, students should be encouraged to explore it and to enjoy the unique contribution that it can make to their lives and the lives of others. Being a stranger is not being alone or isolated – it is being different and understanding that difference through the Other. It is not to be avoided or feared, but students often need permission to recognize, appreciate, and interrogate the strangerhood into which they have brought themselves – perhaps even to rejoice in it.
- **Avoid pedagogies of narcissism.** In working with students across national-culture borders, I have come to appreciate that absolutist values should be abandoned and that difference needs to be dignified. As a mentor, I try to recognize the uniqueness of my mentees and the strangerhood that connects us, and separates us. That can be challenging. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the real failing of Narcissus and Echo was not a singular preoccupation with self; rather, it was the inability to recognize the Other. Hess (2003), alluding to this in her discussion of the *pedagogy of narcissism*, reminds us that there are always recognition issues at play: “the ultimate role of the mentor is to help students articulate their particular voices. When the mentor is also able to receive from the voice she [sic] nurtures, conversational education takes place” (p. 136).

Acknowledging strangerhood provides the opportunity for international students and their advisors to meet as fellow travelers, recognizing that their journeys – spatial, cultural, and educational – are uniquely different, valuable, and empowering. Preserving and engaging with strangerhood allows my mentees in Prague to appreciate that knowledge is not situated in a unique place, any more than they are rooted in single place. Those who engage in personal journeys, irrespective of how those journeys might be

conceived or where they may lead, are passing travelers and inevitable strangers.

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