



A Phenomenological Approach to the Study of Social Distance

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Abstract

From its very beginning, sociological thought has been concerned with a topic central to our daily lives: social distance. Since inception, the concept of social distance has referred to the relationships of familiarity and strangeness between social groups, which is experienced in the social world in terms of “We” and “They”. This article covers the main tenets of a Schutzian phenomenological approach to the study of social distance and group relationships. Specific focus is placed on the different attitudes and valuations of the in-group towards the out-group considered as a stranger, the invisible excess of meaning that emerges in these types of social relationships and the conceptual construction of the Other that explains the phenomenon of discrimination.

Keywords Social distance · Stranger · Otherness · Discrimination · COVID-19 · Phenomenology

Introduction

“Social distance” is one of the key concepts being discussed nowadays in international sociology. Often used to address the study of ethnicity, class, gender, status and other types of social relationships between groups in society, the main idea behind the concept is that “any given social relationship, in addition to other characteristics, always involves elements of ‘nearness’ and ‘distance’” (Karakayali 2016), closeness or proximity and remoteness, familiarity and strangeness. There is, however, a diversity of ways in which social distance is conceptualized as a sociological notion. Social researchers usually emphasize the affective dimension of social distance, i.e., how members of a group “feel” about others. They also reflect on the way ‘us’ is distinguished from ‘them’ in terms of normative patterns. Some perspectives

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emphasize the “interactive” aspect, referring to how long and how often people interact with each other. In addition, the cultural-habitudinal dimension is examined by studying the extent to which groups share similar traits. The question of how these different dimensions interact with each other and with other types of distance (especially spatial) is a salient area of research. Beyond the multiple aspects highlighted for the study of social distance between groups, another trait to be taken into account is the different attitudes of a group toward alterity in terms of acceptance, tolerance, intolerance, hostility, confrontation and discrimination, among others. This attitudinal aspect brings to the foreground issues of xenophobia, racism and social inequality. For contemporary societies, this stresses a significant need for further study. It is widely noted that, as interactions with “strangers” intensify, norms distinguishing “us” from “them” become increasingly problematic in modern societies, giving way to both more tolerant and xenophobic attitudes. In all likelihood, “therefore, social distance will continue to be a significant area of research for contemporary scholars” (Karakayali 2016: 2).

As such, the COVID-19 pandemic provides an invitation to reconsider the phenomena of social distance in a new light, as the pandemic has reinforced tendencies toward xenophobia and discrimination. The “bolstering of national policies and the closing of borders (often accompanied by panicked xenophobia)” (Butler 2020), go hand in hand with a rise in biases against some groups associated with the pandemic. The case of Asian Americans in the United States illustrates the upsurge in racially motivated hate crimes involving physical violence and harassment (Gover et al. 2020). Asian Americans have been associated with the stigmatization and “othering” of people of Asian descent, and have experienced verbal and physical violence motivated by racism and xenophobia. At the institutional level, the state has implicitly reinforced and encouraged this violence through bigoted rhetoric. According to a report prepared by *Human Rights Watch* (2020), government leaders and senior officials in some cases have directly or indirectly encouraged hate crimes, racism, or xenophobia by using anti-Chinese rhetoric.¹

According to the report, COVID-19 has enabled the spread of racism and created national insecurity and general xenophobia, which may be related to the increase in anti-Asian hate crimes during the pandemic. However, discrimination hasn’t been limited to the United States or to Asians and people of Asian descent. Persistent racist rhetoric in public discourse against foreign workers is also present in India and Sri Lanka, where leaders have done little to stop rising anti-Muslim discrimination. In the past months, many apparent COVID-19-related cases of attacks and discrimination against Muslims have been reported. In

¹ The observatory reports that the governor of the Veneto region of Italy told journalists in February that the country would be better than China in handling the virus due to Italians’ “culturally strong attention to hygiene, washing hands and taking showers, whereas we have all seen the Chinese eating mice alive”. It also states that the Brazilian Education Minister ridiculed Chinese people in a tweet, suggesting the pandemic was part of the Chinese government’s “plan for world domination”. This increment in racist rhetoric has coincided with an increment in racist attacks: “Since February, Asians and people of Asian descent around the world have been subjected to attacks and beatings, violent bullying, threats, racist abuse, and discrimination that appear linked to the pandemic”.

Myanmar, ultra-nationalist leaders have used the pandemic to justify threats and hate speech against Muslims. Other types of discrimination connected with the pandemic have also been reported. In Argentina, *The National Institute Against Discrimination, Xenophobia and Racism* (INADI) reported that since the declaration of the pandemic, average daily volume of claims has increased by 40%. Cases of discrimination against patients infected with COVID-19 as well as those tested for coronavirus have expanded to include complaints against health workers and Chinese supermarket employees, all of whom are accused of being a “source of infection” (Zayat 2020).

The intent of this article is not to present an in-depth exploration of the phenomena of discrimination and xenophobia reinforced by the pandemic. Rather, this article takes that issue as its starting point and explores the conceptual tools for approaching the study of social distance from a phenomenological point of view. The phenomenological viewpoint provides fertile ground for approaching the phenomenon of social distance at both a philosophical and cultural-historical level. Searching for a solid philosophical foundation of the concepts of social sciences, Alfred Schutz proposed that “all scientific concepts of social facts already presuppose a conscious or unconscious theory of the structure of the social world” (Schutz and Parsons 1978: 11). Following this guideline, this article explores the philosophical foundation of the concept of social distance and its underlying theory of the structure of the life-world. The first aim is to unravel the sources of unfamiliarity/strangeness contained in the structure of the life-world, which constitutes the conditions of the dynamics of social reality. A second and closely connected aim is to investigate the ways in which the experience of strangeness in the social world is organized into zones of varying social distance between groups.

In order to achieve these objectives, the article is organized into four main sections. The first section presents a brief history of the concept in sociological thought. It is suggested that classical sociologists’ reflection on the issue of social distance is a consequence of the emergence and consolidation of industrial society. Phenomena such as social classes, the division of labour, the proximity between groups the new society entails, the impact of a new life in a metropolis and the consequent anonymity in social relationships between groups, are interpreted by sociological approach through the concept of social distance. Secondly, Georg Simmel’s impact on American sociology is analysed and an overview of the intellectual context in which Schutz addresses the issue is offered. North American intellectual scene provides a different treatment of the phenomenon of social distance, connected to the need to respond to emerging social problems of racism, discrimination, xenophobia and social exclusion, derived from migration and cultural contact in complex societies. This is also the cross-cutting theme in Schutzian works of the period. The third section covers the way in which Schutz addressed the issue of the stranger. Sources of unfamiliarity/strangeness contained in the structure of the life-world are explored using Ilja Srubar’s notions of existential and comparative strangeness. The fourth and final section presents main traits of a Schutzian phenomenological approach to the study of social distance. Schutz’s contribution to the study of relationships between social groups is re-established with a focus on the different attitudes and valuations of the in-group towards the out-group considered as a stranger, the invisible excess of

meaning that emerges in these types of social relationships and the conceptual construction of the Other that explains the phenomenon of discrimination.

Social distance from a sociological perspective

Sociological reflection on the notion of social distance has its origin in the works of three classical thinkers: Gabriel Tarde, Émile Durkheim and Georg Simmel. The concept of social distance was first introduced by Tarde in his book *The Laws of Imitation* (1903 [1890]). Since its inception, the concept of social distance has referred to the relationship between social groups, to their constitutions as “We” and “They” in terms of group membership, and, fundamentally, to a discussion of the stranger. According to Tarde:

Distance is understood here in its sociological meaning. However distant in space a stranger may be, he is close by, from this point of view, if we have numerous and daily relations with him and if we have every facility to satisfy our desire to imitate him. This law of the imitation of the nearest, of the least distant, explains the gradual and consecutive character of the spread of an example that has been set by the highest social ranks. We may infer, as its corollary, when we see a lower class setting itself to imitating for the first time a much higher class that the distance between the two had diminished. (Tarde 1903 [1890]: 224)

Tarde appears to be the first sociologist to propose that the distance between two groups, defined in terms of classes, can be derived from the degree of imitation that exists between them. As Nedim Karakayali states, in subsequent literature, this emphasis seems to have shifted to the overall result of imitative processes, that is, to cultural similarities. He maintained that as the degree of imitation between two groups increases, there builds up more cultural similarity and, therefore, increases social proximity between them (Karakayali 2009: 539). One example of this drift can be found in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1990), who conceives social distance as the cultural distance between groups and classes that can be mapped in social space. In Bourdieu’s language, the different agents, groups and institutions that are situated in social space: “have more properties in common the closer they are to each other; and fewer common properties, the further they are away from each other” (Bourdieu 1990: 127). As a consequence, and by theoretical, “on paper,” approach: “Spatial distances coincide with social distances” (Bourdieu 1990: 127). However, although it is possible to observe this structural tendency to segregate in space and to affirm that people close to each other in social space tend to be close in geographical space, real interactions tend to be somehow different. People who are very distant from each other in social space can enter into interaction in physical space. That is the case of agents who, occupying a higher position in one of the hierarchies of objective space, symbolically deny the social distance which does not cease to exist: “In short, one can use the objective distances so as to have the advantages of proximity and the advantages of distance, that is, the distance and the recognition of the distance that is ensured by the symbolic negation of distance” (Bourdieu 1990:

127f.). Beyond the important discussion of the links between social and spatial distance, this viewpoint emphasizes that social proximity between groups increases according to the degree of their cultural similarities, which are understood as the result of imitative processes.

Turning to the question of where the concept of social distance originated, it is generally attributed to Simmel, in particular to his “Stranger” manuscript (Ethington 1997; McLemore 1970). However, although Simmel’s may well have been the first consequential use of the concept in sociology, it had previously been used by Tarde, and “under the guise of moral density by Émile Durkheim” (Levine et al. 1976: 835). Durkheim devised his reflection of physical and social distance in talking about principles of social integration characteristic of organic solidarity. According to his view, the division of labour progresses the more individuals there are who are sufficiently in contact with one another to be able mutually to act and react upon one another. This is what Durkheim calls “dynamic or moral density,” a “drawing together and the active exchanges that result from it”. As a consequence of these active exchanges, the progress of the division of labour is in direct proportion to the moral or dynamic density of society. Additionally, moral density is, and should be, correlative to physical density. In this regard he states:

But this act of drawing together morally can only bear fruit if the real distance between individuals has itself diminished, in whatever manner. Moral density cannot therefore increase without physical density increasing at the same time, and the latter can serve to measure the extent of the former. Moreover, it is useless to investigate which of the two has influenced the other; it suffices to realise that they are inseparable. (Durkheim 1984 [1893]: 202)

Proximity between groups then is expressed in terms of social interactions and involves, in Durkheimian words, active exchanges between individuals that result in drawing together morally; this process is the basis of social integration. In this respect, the formation and development of towns are, according to Durkheim, a further symptom, even more characteristic, of the same phenomenon. Towns always result from the driving need of individuals to keep in the closest possible contact with one another: “They are like so many points where the social mass is contracting more strongly than elsewhere. They cannot therefore multiply and spread out unless the moral density increases” (Durkheim 1984 [1893]: 203).

Historically, the study of both integration in general and of residential integration in particular has been bound to the study of the city. The emergence of modern social science was in part a response to the formation of the modern city. The mass migration from country to town at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution generated new forms of behavior and social problems that called for scientific attention. The study of integration has its roots in this moment and, in particular, in Durkheim’s work. He interpreted integration as the degree to which common rules and values are shared. The notions of “moral density” or “moral rapprochement” refer to this context produced by the reduction of spatial distance between individuals (Weinar et al. 2017: 120). Tarde’s reflection on social distance also has its roots in that moment, specifically as regards the emergence of class society. Sociological thinking that emerged from this context outlines two possible approaches to social

distance: The first, linked to the law of imitation and to the build-up of cultural similarities between groups and, the second one, concerned with social integration and the strength of social ties in the context of the division of labour. A third perspective, also rooted in the emergence of the Industrial Revolution and its impact on social life, focused around the work of Simmel, who takes as his point of departure the ideal type of the stranger:

The sociology of the stranger is a very broad rubric which encompasses phenomena ranging from the initiation of new social relationships to the assimilation of the newcomers and from the effects of the stranger on the social structure and culture of the receiving group to the social-psychological processes which characterizes the stranger's role within the group. (McLemore 1970: 87)

Reflection on the experience of the stranger opens the horizon to reflect on different modalities of group affiliation. Moreover, in Simmel's scheme, the "utilization of the metaphor of distance was by no means restricted to his pages on the stranger; it constitutes a pervasive and distinctive feature of his sociology as a whole and of his philosophical thought as well" (Levine et al. 1976: 835).

In the following pages, a brief reference is made to Simmel's work on social distance, and its impact on American sociology is explored. The presentation aims to elucidate certain aspects of the discussion in which Schutz reflects on the stranger ideal type and the notion of social distance. Although Simmel reflects upon the sociological form of the stranger in the context of social problems connected to the emergence of industrial society, the reception of his theory by American sociology is produced in connection with new challenges associated with the complexity of the American society of that time and with the emergence of racism, xenophobic attitudes and discrimination. As will be shown later, it is clear that in Schutz's work there is a recognition of this context and of these problem areas.

Simmel on social distance and its impact on American sociology

Simmelian treatment of the notion of social distance involves reflection on the way nearness and remoteness are present in every social relationship. The sociological form of the stranger allows for dealing with not only the proportion of proximity and distance that exists in every social relation but also with the bonds (or connections) between spatial and social sense of distance and the different modalities of group affiliation, i.e., the in-group and out-group relationships. The type of stranger he deals with is the "potential wanderer:"

The stranger is thus being discussed here, not in the sense often touched upon in the past, as the wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather as the person who comes today and stays tomorrow. He is, so to speak, the potential wanderer: although he has not moved on, he has not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going. He is fixed within a particular spatial group, or within a group whose boundaries are similar to spatial boundaries. But his position in this group is determined, essentially, by the fact that he has not

belonged to it from the beginning, that he imports qualities into it, which do not and cannot stem from the group itself. (Simmel 1950 [1908]: 402)

The assertion that the union of proximity and distance is involved in every human relationship must not go unnoticed. This general trait of human relationships, in the sociological form of the stranger, acquires special features: “it is patterned in a way that may be succinctly formulated as follows: the distance within this relation indicates that one who is close by is remote, but his strangeness indicates that one who is remote is near” (Simmel 1971 [1908]: 143). The spatial and the social sense of distance also show special characteristics in the sociological form of the stranger: “the sociological form of the stranger presents the synthesis [...] of both of these properties” (Simmel 1971 [1908]: 143). This synthesis is compounded by a state of detachment/attachment from and to a given point in space, being that spatial relations are determining conditions of relationships among people and groups, and also symbolic of those relationships. As stated by Dale Mc Lemore when referring to Simmel’s stranger “[...] the principal point of interest has been that a person may be a member of a group in a *spatial* sense but still not be a member of a group in a *social* sense; that a person may be *in* the group but not *of it*” (McLemore 1970: 86).

All social forms are defined to some extent in terms of the dimension of interpersonal or intersubjective distance. Some forms, like conflict, bring distant people into close contact. Others, like secrecy, increase the distance between people. Some forms organize gradations of vertical distance, whereas other forms organize horizontal distances. Forms like the stranger entail distinctive combinations of both proximity and distance. Simmel’s sociology includes a pioneering analysis of the effects of variations in physical distance on social relations. In this respect, the phenomenon of the metropolis² shows that the relations between contemporary urbanities resemble stranger relations in most aspects: “Social boundaries that are so significant in urban stratification exist alongside time/space distantiation, abstract spaces of circulation and exchange and the transpatial ‘community’ of the money economy” (Frisby 2004: xxxi). As David Frisby mentions, we are socialized as strangers in the metropolis, and this fact points to the crucial discussion of Otherness. The modes of interacting with others in the modern metropolis are associated with the creation of social distance. Sociability is shaped on the basis of the form rather than the content of interaction, which already presupposes distance. However, this presupposition is not as dramatically perceived as in the exploration of our confrontation with the Other as a stranger:

Our more abstract relationship to the stranger as Other, the sense of fortuitousness in our relations with the stranger, our relation to strangers in the city not as individuals but rather as strangers of a particular type, and Simmel’s references to ‘inner enemies’ and the proximity/distance dialectic in the stranger’s position creating ‘dangerous possibilities,’ all indicate that this is a crucial discussion of Otherness. (Frisby 2004: xxxi)

² The peculiarity of social interactions that is made explicit in reference to the role of social distance in the modern metropolis is examined more fully in Simmel’s essays on space.

The aforementioned synthesis of proximity and distance which constitutes the formal position of the stranger depends on the type of stranger with which we are dealing. Each type expresses a certain amount of nearness and remoteness. Although “*both these qualities are found to some extent in all relationships*, a special proportion and reciprocal tension between them produce the specific form of the relation to the ‘stranger’” (Simmel 1971 [1908]: 149). According to these remarks, it could be stated that different types of stranger allow for expressing different proportions and reciprocal tensions of nearness and remoteness, that is to say, of social distance. These types also refer to different modalities of group affiliation. The more abstract the modes of interacting with others are, the greater the risks of transforming them into “internal enemies” whose membership within the group involves both being outside it and confronting it.

Types of Strangers: Robert Park’s Marginal Man

The sociological form of the stranger “was quickly differentiated from the parent concept and since 1924 has guided an independent and cumulative research tradition” (McLemore 1970: 87). As mentioned by specialists in the field, the subsequent tradition misunderstood Simmel’s stranger’s traits, which as a consequence, “altered the shape of the concept” (Levine et al. 1976: 830). That is the case of Robert Park who, taking as his point of departure Simmel’s definition of the stranger to analyze the phenomena of migration and culture contact in complex societies, proposed the concept of the “marginal man” as a counterpart: “The emancipated Jew was, and is, historically and typically the marginal man, the first cosmopolite and citizen of the world” (Park 1928: 892). The marginal man is a person who aspires to have, but is excluded from, full membership in a new group. Park suggested that various kinds of deviant behavior such as crime, delinquency and illegitimacy, reflected the experience of the persons who, by migrating, had given up old values but had not adequately acquired the norms and skills of their new setting (Levine et al. 1976: 830). Everett Stonequist, Park’s student, criticized this point by indicating that the marginal man was not identical to Simmel’s stranger who, closer to the type of a “potential wanderer,” does not aspire to be assimilated. This is described by Stonequist as follows: “His relative detachment frees him from the self-consciousness, the concern for status, and the divided loyalties of the marginal man” (Stonequist 1961 [1937]: 178). In spite of the clarity of Stonequist’s criticism and of the distinction proposed by him between “marginality” and “strangerhood,” Park’s interpretation has prevailed as the dominant reading of Simmel’s stranger in the American context of that time: “The tendency to confuse the marginal man with Simmel’s stranger has persisted” and Simmel has been misread “through Park’s distorting” (Levine et al. 1976: 831).

Another direction was taken by Margaret Wood, who expanded Simmel’s concept. She defined the type of stranger as that of the “newly arrived outsider”:

[w]e shall describe the stranger as one who has come into face-to-face contact with the group for the first time [...] For us the stranger may be, as with Sim-

mel, a potential wanderer, but he may also be a wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, or he may come today and remain with us permanently. (Wood 1934: 43f.)

Stonequist and Wood's works broadened the typology, opened a new path for thinking about a variety of types of strangers, and proposed a more differentiated view of the phenomena, which takes into consideration the proportion of proximity and distance, and different modalities of group affiliation. As will be shown below, Schutz also expanded the typology and connected its construction with empirical research. However, the confusion around the different types of strangers "has impeded the development of a more productive sociology of the stranger" (McLemore 1970: 87). As Dale McLemore lucidly affirmed: "[t]his statement illustrates the tendency of scholars to turn immediately to Simmel whenever the word stranger is mentioned, even when the tradition presented by Wood and Schutz is the more pertinent" (1970: 87).

Spatial and Social Distance: Emery Bogardus' Scale of Social Distance

Simmelian notion of social distance became a prominent concept in American sociology in the 1920's owing to a collective need to understand the relations among racial groups in the United States (Levine et al. 1976: 836). In 1928, Park's student, Emery Bogardus, constructed the first statistical measurement scale of attitude and opinions in order to measure racial prejudices. Taking as his starting point the notion of social distance, he converted it into psychological distance. Bogardus' scale distributes numerical values to different types of social relationships ranging from the closest social relations (marriage) to the most distant (hostility and social exclusion) (Martínez 1999: 32). The social distance scale usually consists of five to seven statements that progressively express more or less intimacy toward the group considered. Typical scale anchors are "would have to live outside of my country (7)" and "would marry (1)". In this case, a respondent who accepts item "seven" would be more prejudiced than a respondent who marks item "one" or any other item on the scale. The cumulative aspect also means that a respondent who expresses a given degree of intimacy will endorse items expressing less intimacy. A respondent willing to accept a member of a group in their neighbourhood will also accept that same group in their country. Conversely, those who refuse to accept a group in their country will also refuse to accept them in their neighbourhood (Wark and Galliher 2007: 392).

Rephrasing Simmel's vocabulary in terms of familiarity and unfamiliarity, Philip Ethington (1997) makes a distinction between metaphoric and geometric distance. Metaphoric distance is strangeness: the "unfamiliar". Geometric distance is the structure of everyday life in space-time that permits or promotes the formation of familiarity. In those terms, the stranger is characterized by the fact that he or she "literally was not here when we developed our familiarity". Ethington regrets that Simmelian concept of social distance, in the hands of his successors, "was impoverished by stripping away Simmel's geometric sense of distance". Moreover, the loss of the spatial sense of distance was accompanied by a neglect of the analysis of social structure. According to Charles Kadushin, through the writings of Park

and Bogardus, *social distance* entered the terminology of American sociology and “became fixed as a social-psychological, rather than as a social-structural factor” (Kadushin 1962: 519). Yet social distance became “firmly entrenched in the guise of an attitude scale and was thus largely removed from consideration as an element of social structure” (Kadushin 1962: 519). This criticism draws attention to the importance of the study of social structure and the centrality of empirical research to approach the links between physical and social distance. The question as to whether spatial proximity might lead to social proximity, and to what extent social distance between different status, ethnic or gender groups translates into “locational,” remains open for more empirical research (Karakayali 2016). This general overview allows for diverse ways of identifying the classification of social distance.

Types of Social Distance

Kadushin identified possible categories to classify different types of social distance. According to his view, there are four dimensions of social distance: Normative, interactive, cultural or valuational, and personal aspects of distance. Normative distance alludes to role prescription, an aspect that “refers to the manner and degree of interaction which *ought to* hold between two or more persons or statuses” (Kadushin 1962: 519). Secondly, “interactive distance” refers to role interactions, i.e., the degree of actual interaction, measured as a rate in any given situation. Thirdly, cultural distance refers to the “degree of value homophily that exists between two persons or statuses”. Finally, personal distance or empathy is “the degree of understanding and unspoken communication that takes place between two persons or statuses” (Kadushin 1962: 519).

Another classification elaborated by Karakayali, proposes that social distance is not a monolithic concept but that there exist diverse forms of classification. Firstly, it is possible to identify the type of social distance understood as affective distance, i.e., people who are socially close “feel close” to each other and vice versa (Karakayali 2016: 1). Bogardus’ work is an example of this; his social scale aims to identify the willingness of the members of a group to form certain types of relations (for instance, marriage or working together) with the members of other groups: “What the Bogardus Scale measures is what the members of a group *feel* about another group that they already perceive as being distant/distinct from their own group” (Karakayali 2009: 541; emphasis added). Although important, some conceptions of social distance reduce its study to only the affective dimension of distance. Secondly, social distance can be conceived as normative distance. Most groups have collectively recognized criteria -norms of inclusion and exclusion- for differentiating “us” from “they”. Such norms dictate what kinds of relations the members of a group can form and with whom, and allow distinguishing degrees of membership to a group. The latter aspect might overlap with the subjective feelings of the members. It is also possible that a discrepancy occurs between what the members feel and what the normative system dictates. Thirdly, social distance can be interpreted by a focus on interaction between groups. The more a group of people interact with each other, the more likely they are to constitute a “society”. The frequency and length of interaction between different actors are often used as a significant

yardstick for determining the nature of the actor's "social ties" and networks. The well-known work of Mark Granovetter moves in this direction, showing that frequency and length of interaction are used as two major criteria for deciding about the weakness or strength of a social tie. Granovetter states that "the strength of a tie is a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding) and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie" (Granovetter 1973: 1361). The fourth type refers to the existence of cultural similarities. As mentioned in Sect. 1, this perspective can be found in Tarde's theory of imitation and is at the core of Bourdieu's theory of social space. The most recognized use of cultural and habitual distance was developed by Bourdieu. This aspect can also be understood as the symbolic dimension of social relationships in terms of cultural-habitual commonalities and differences.

The following section returns to McLemore's suggestion and shows the relevance of a Schutzian phenomenological approach for the study of social distance. It is argued that the phenomenological viewpoint provides a rich and complete description of human experiences of strangeness and social distance. Although his contribution has remained long forgotten and marginal within sociological discussion, Schutzian work has a great significance. Its importance hinges on the main purpose of his whole reflection, which can be summarized as an "attempt to provide a phenomenological foundation for the basic concepts of the social sciences" (Walsh and Lehnert 1932 [1967]: ix). In what follows, the phenomenological foundation for the study of social distance is underlined, and the main tenets of Schutzian approach are introduced. On one hand, those tenets are based on the constitutive analysis of the experience of strangeness understood as a trait of our human condition and of our experience of the life-world; this analysis lays down the preliminary conditions for the constitution of social distance. And, on the other hand, they are based on constructive analysis, which refers to the socio-historical expression of the phenomenon. Both terms are connected with different approaches that can be held in relation to a specific phenomenon. These different approaches, the phenomenological analysis of constitution and the reconstruction of historical human constructions of reality can, and should, "complement each other" (Luckmann 2007: 131).

Schutz on the Experience of Strangeness

The Stranger

In his article, Schutz acknowledges the previous discussion around the stranger.³ In accordance with the debates of the period, he recognized, as did Stonequist and Wood, the potentiality of thinking in different types of strangers, and took the stance on a more differentiated view of the phenomena. Schutz explores the proportion of

³ In the first footnote of his article "The Stranger" he mentions the works of Simmel, Stonequist and Bogardus among others. However, he refers the reader to "the valuable monograph by Margaret Mary Wood" (Schutz 1964c: 92).

proximity and distance, and different modalities of group affiliation by analyzing a type of stranger clearly delineated: “[...] the term ‘stranger’ shall mean an adult individual of our times and civilization who tries to be permanently accepted or at least tolerated by the group which he approaches. The outstanding example for the social situation under scrutiny is that of the immigrant” (Schutz 1964c: 91). The wide scope of Schutzian proposal is due to the fact that he does not associate the stranger ideal type with any particular group, but he suggests that a certain social position can be occupied by many different groups. Schutz does not restrict the analysis to the special case of the immigrant but includes in this category such diverse groups as:

The applicant for membership in a closed club, the prospective bridegroom who wants to be admitted to the girl’s family, the farmer’s son who enters college, the city-dweller who settles in a rural environment, the ‘selectee’ who joins the Army, the family of the war worker who moves into a boom town -all are strangers according to the definition just given. (Schutz 1964c: 91)

Moreover, he is not interested in the processes of “social assimilation” and “social adjustment,” as Park would be, for instance, but rather in the “situation of approaching” which precedes every possible social adjustment and includes its prerequisites. The typical social situation that Schutz is dealing with is that of the stranger attempting to interpret the cultural pattern of the social group he approaches and to orient himself within it.

The “cultural pattern of group life” designates “[...] all the peculiar valuations, institutions, and systems of orientation and guidance (such as the folkways, mores, laws, habits, customs, etiquette, fashions)” (Schutz 1964c: 92). This cultural pattern is “correlated” (Schutz 1964c: 92) to the stock of knowledge shared by the group. Schutz defines the “stock of knowledge at hand” as the “total content of all my experience, or of all my perceptions of the world in the broadest sense, [which] is, then, brought together and coordinated in the total context of my experience” (Schutz 1932 [1967]: 76). The stock of knowledge is a social heritage handed down to us by family and teachers (Schutz 1962c: 348). It is also a stock of our previous experiences, a scheme of reference, a “knowledge at hand” consisting in the sedimentation of various previous activities of our mind. These schemes of reference are “guided” by systems of prevailing operative relevances of different kinds, which we can use for the interpretation of a world. The isohypses of relevances shape our stock of knowledge, and this fact shows that the knowledge of people who act and think within the world of their daily life “is not homogeneous”. Our position in the life-world (physical, temporal, biographical, our status and role in the social system and our moral and ideological position within it) illuminates its objects and outlines its contours. This is our familiar world that existed before our birth and was experienced and interpreted by our predecessors as an organized world. We take it for granted and consider our knowledge of the life-world “until further notice as the unquestioned, though at any time questionable” (Schutz 1962a: 7). The actor within the social world organizes the knowledge of that world in terms of relevance to his actions. The world seems to him, at any given moment, stratified in different layers of relevance, each of them requiring a different degree of knowledge. The system of

knowledge takes on, for the members of the in-group, the appearance of a *sufficient* coherence, clarity, and consistency. Consequently, the cultural pattern functions as a system of tested recipes at hand. Any member born or reared within the group accepts the ready-made standardized scheme of the cultural pattern handed down to him by ancestors, teachers, and authorities as an unquestioned and unquestionable guide for all situations that normally occur within the social world. This is what Schutz calls “thinking as usual,” and this concept corresponds to Max Scheler’s “relatively natural conception of the world” [*relativ natürliche Weltanschauung*], which includes all assumptions relevant to a particular social group. Only members of the in-group, aware of having a definite status in its hierarchy, can use its cultural pattern as a natural and trustworthy scheme of orientation. The adoption of a common system of relevances leads the members of the group to a homogeneous self-typification. Schutz calls this the subjective meaning of group membership. For those who have grown up within the cultural pattern, the recipes and their possible efficiency along with the typical and anonymous attitudes required by them, are an unquestioned “matter of course” that provides both security and assurance. These attitudes, by their very anonymity and typicality, are placed not within the actor’s stratum of relevance, which requires explicit knowledge *of*, but in the region of mere trustworthy acquaintance. This interrelation between objective chance, typicality, anonymity, and relevance is important for the social attempting needed to interpret the cultural pattern of the social group the stranger approaches.

The cartographical metaphor developed by Schutz⁴ is useful here to give account of the experience of the stranger. The cultural pattern of the in-group and its corresponding stock of knowledge function as a scheme of orientation in the social territory: “The life-world is thus grasped with the help of the stock of knowledge, much in the way one locates himself in countryside with the aid of maps. The explanations of signs, descriptions of places, etc., are taken from the now prevailing ‘Objective’ geography” (Schutz and Luckmann 1974: 181). This means that the stock of knowledge correlated to the cultural pattern acts as a map that helps the members of the group to locate themselves in the social life-world. According to the ideal type constructed by Schutz, the cultural pattern of the approached group does not have the authority of a tested system of recipes, and this is, if for no other reason, because the stranger does not partake in the vivid historical tradition from which it has been formed (Schutz 1964c: 96). The stranger starts to interpret his new social environment in terms of his “thinking as usual,” i.e., within the scheme of reference brought from his home group. However, he lacks any status as a member of the social group he is about to join and is therefore unable to obtain a starting-point to get his bearings:

He finds himself a border case *outside the territory* covered by the scheme of orientation current within the group. He is, therefore, no longer permitted to consider himself as the center of his social environment, and this fact

⁴ For an in-depth analysis of this issue, see López 2021; forthcoming).

causes again a *dislocation of his contour lines of relevance*. (Schutz 1964c: 99; emphasis added)

This dislocation resembles an empirical case study on the downwardly mobile middle class from the time of Argentina's 2001 crisis onwards (Banega 2014). The analysis presented by the author shows how a decline in social position implies distancing or displacement from the stock of knowledge available in the position from which the actor is moving away. In situations of structural crisis, the stock of knowledge at hand loses practical effectiveness. The notion of “displaced stock of knowledge” (Banega 2014: 55) refers to situations of ascending or descending social mobility, in which the stock of knowledge at hand undergoes substantive changes because the class position of the social agent wielding it has been modified.

More radical is the case of the Schutzian stranger, who meets obstacles in his attempt at interpreting the approached group and faces “incongruence” and “distortion” of his stock of knowledge at hand and the corresponding contour line of his own group relevance system. The shape of his contour lines of relevance by necessity differs radically from those of a member of the in-group regarding situations, recipes, means, ends, social partners, etc. As a consequence, the stranger subsumes individuals showing certain characteristics and traits under a social category that is homogeneous in his, the outsider's, point of view. The notion of the group becomes a conceptual construct of the outsider. Schutz calls this objective interpretation. Keeping in mind the above-mentioned interrelationship between relevance, on the one hand, and typicality and anonymity, on the other, “it follows that he uses another yardstick for anonymity and typicality of social acts than the members of the in-group” (Schutz 1964c: 103). Therefore, he cannot integrate the personal types constructed by him into a coherent picture of the approached group and cannot rely on his expectation of their response. Even less can the stranger himself adopt those typical and anonymous attitudes to which a member of the in-group is entitled to expect from a partner in a typical situation:

Hence the stranger's lack of feeling for distance, his oscillating between remoteness and intimacy, his hesitation and uncertainty, and his distrust in every matter which seems to be so simple and uncomplicated to those who rely on the efficiency of unquestioned recipes which have just to be followed but not understood. (Schutz 1964c: 103)

The level of familiarity of our social stock of knowledge diminishes, and strangeness takes possession of intersubjective relationships. In this sense, “the stranger in the state of transition does not consider this pattern as a protecting shelter at all but as a *labyrinth* in which he has lost all sense of his bearings” (Schutz 1964c: 105; emphasis added). This labyrinth announces the intransparency of the life-world whose opacity is imposed on the individual situation. As Schutz and Luckmann describe, there is always “something un-familiar sketched behind the familiar, something undetermined behind the determined [...]. These ‘residua’ of opacity, which can be demonstrated in every element of knowledge, announce the intransparency of the life-world” (Schutz and Luckmann 1974: 174). In the case

of the stranger, the labyrinth metaphor announces the existence of opacity and “invisible aspects” emerging in social interactions.⁵ A dislocation occurs between his stock of knowledge structured on the basis of his own group relevance system -its correlative cultural pattern- and the cultural pattern of the social group he approaches. The Other’s transcendence, which is a general feature of our experience of the world, is experienced in its extreme form in the case of the stranger. Consequently, strangeness and misunderstanding emerge in social interaction between groups. In Sect. 4, the processes triggered by this “invisible excess” of meaning in group relationships will be developed in-depth.

Existential and Comparative Strangeness

First, it is necessary to concentrate on the sources of unfamiliarity/strangeness that are contained in the structure of the life-world. According to Schutz, “strangeness and familiarity are not limited to the social field but are general categories of our interpretation of the world” (Schutz 1964c: 105). For the phenomenological stance, the dimensions of the social and cultural world consist of constructions that rest on the constitution of previous and primary dimensions, which in turn, have their own structures. These structures are the subjective activities, and their constancy is the correlate of the constancy of the object. The constitution of objectivity is then the product of the subjective operations of constitution, and those operations are constant. In accordance with this viewpoint, Schutz considers that the fundamental dimensions of those constitutive activities are part of the human condition.⁶ In this respect, it can be argued from a phenomenological perspective that empirical diversity is based on common constitutive mechanisms of consciousness. These acts of consciousness are characterized, according to Srubar (2005), by their “plasticity”. From this position, the phenomenological approach keeps arguments concerning the universal structure of the life-world and offers a connection to empirical findings (Srubar 2005: 238). Accordingly, in Schutz’s work lies a formal structural description of the life-world which is universal in its reach, and this structure has a correlate

⁵ This idea was developed by Alice Koubová (2014), and refers to the existence of opacity and invisible aspects of agents in social interaction. She analyses the hypothesis according to which there is “an aspect of invisibility that functions as a subtle source of ungraspable meaning, as an excess of sense, whose function is performative”. We propose that this “invisible excess of sense” is particularly important in the experience of the Other as a stranger.

⁶ For instance, Schutz shows how universal symbols originate in universal traits of the general human condition. In this respect, some cultural constructions are found in the structure of our own body, which is considered “as a center *O* of a system of coordinates” under which we group the objects of our environment in terms of ‘above and underneath,’ ‘before and behind,’ ‘right and left.’ That system of coordinates organizes our experience in the life-world and is the basis of the construction of different cultural symbols. In Chinese thought, for example, the head symbolizes the sky whereas the feet symbolize earth; because the sky has to send rain in order to fertilize the earth, the sky also symbolizes the male principle, the positive principle, *Yang*, and earth the negative, female *Yin*. “And this symbolism of higher-lower has its correlate in Chinese medicine, music, dance, social hierarchy, etiquette, all of which are correlated and can be brought into symbolic appresentational reference one with the other” (see Schutz 1962c: 334f.).

in specific instances of the life-world. As far as the experience of strangeness and familiarity is concerned, a “gradation of unfamiliarity” (Srubar 2005: 251) is, in Schutzian terms, a dimension of the structures of the life-world that, at the same time, constitutes a condition for the dynamics of social reality. However, it is not possible to anticipate the specific historical instantiation of this dimension, nor its principle of constructiveness, because that structure is not static. Rather, it is a constituting mechanism that generates the “dynamics, historicity and differentiation of the life-world,” and is the means by which “we can grasp the stratification of the life-world” (Srubar 2005: 250). The gradation of unfamiliarity understood as a universal trait of the human condition needs to be empirically explored regarding its contents in terms of social and cultural intersubjectivity.

We can also rephrase this twofold dimension of analysis by using the categories of “existential strangeness” and “comparative strangeness” proposed by Srubar. Existential strangeness refers to the experience of transcendence of the life-world. It is important to mention that, following Edmund Husserl, Schutz begins his considerations with the description of the constitution of social reality in the natural attitude of daily life. This means that his considerations are carried out, in the first place, in the *first person singular*⁷ and are then “completed with the reflective experience from the third-person’s perspective” (López Sáenz 2018: 40). At any moment of my existence, “I” find myself in possession of knowledge of a certain sector of the universe, which in the natural attitude I call, briefly, “my world”. This world has from the outset the sense of being typically a world capable of expansion: an “open world” (Schutz 1970: 135) and this openness is expressed in many dimensions, such as space, time, levels of reality and society. *Spatially*, it is open as regards to all the objects of the outer universe, those within and those beyond my actual and potential reach in the broadest sense. In the dimension of *time*, my life-world is open in both past and future, as regards to my experience of this world as having existed before my birth and as continuing after my death. My life-world also reveals *levels of reality*, or finite provinces of meaning, and in this regard, it is also open: The world of working, of imagination, of dream, and all the other intermediate realms connected with the many degrees of tension of my consciousness, those actually experienced as well as those potentially available for me. Finally, it is open in the dimension of *society*, in the sense that it includes as essential components of its meaning the life-worlds of my contemporary fellow human beings, the worlds of my predecessors and successors, and everything created by them and possibly to be brought about by their actions. The transcendence of the Other and his “in principle inaccessibility” represent an omnipresent source of unfamiliarity/strangeness that is contained in the life-world structure (Srubar 2005: 244). Husserlian phenomenology of the life-world is relevant here to elucidate the foundation of Srubar’s distinction between existential and comparative strangeness.

⁷ “We begin our considerations as human beings who are living naturally, objectivating, judging, feeling, willing ‘in the natural attitude.’ What that signifies we shall make clear in simple meditations which can best be carried out in the *first person singular*” (Husserl 1983 [1913]: §27).

In the words of Husserl, we might say that the life-world is, from the very beginning, divided into home-world and alien-world and, at the same time, that “ownness and alienness are present with equal originality” (Waldenfels 2001: 119). According to Bernhard Waldenfels (2011), Husserl characterizes the alien as “a verifiable accessibility of what is inaccessible originally,” and in his *On the Phenomenology of Intersubjectivity*, he speaks in a similarly paradoxical fashion about the “accessibility in genuine inaccessibility, in the mode of incomprehensibility”. The formulation with which Husserl characterizes alienness means that something or someone is accessible not in spite of, but rather “*in its inaccessibility*” (Waldenfels and Steinbock 1990: 20; emphasis in original). However, as something or someone that cannot be comprehended, alienness does not mean that “the door to reality is bolted shut, but rather that its sense is not fully disclosed”. This is closely linked to the transcendence of the Other mentioned by Schutz, which is the result of the open character of our life-world. We are confronted with the alien as the uncanny, the unknown and the unfamiliar, and that experience “belongs to the constant challenges of a human experience that is never entirely at home” (Waldenfels and Steinbock 1990: 19). The Husserlian distinction between home-world and alien-world as part of his phenomenological account of intersubjectivity highlights the transcendence or “radical alterity” of the Other. The constitution of intersubjectivity from Husserl’s perspective shows in all the strata these two aspects that are in tension or “dialectically interdependent” (Rizo-Patrón 2010: 98f.).

The home-world is immediately given to us both cognitively and emotionally. Within our home-world we share the same language and the same gestures; we know the purpose of things that surround us, and the typical ends of other people’s actions with whom we share the same customs. It is the world of “the close,” the “We-world”. For its part, the “alien-world” -viewed from the viewpoint of the “home-world- bursts in as “the distant,” as the external for “We,” as what cannot be anticipated through concrete analogies or typifications. Each thing, sign or gesture is different, and everything results in an “unknown totality”. The alien-world refers to the transcendence of Others who have “other experiences, other natural surroundings, other life purposes, other beliefs of all types, other customs, other practical pattern behaviors, other traditions” (Husserl 1973: 214; my translation). In Schutzian terms, this is expressed as other cultural patterns, and other “relatively natural conception of the world”.

However, when talking about “strangeness” it is important to distinguish various nuances (Waldenfels 1997: 74) or gradations of unfamiliarity. The “accessibility of what is inaccessible originally” that characterizes the experience of the strangeness depends on given modes of access, which are the reason why different degrees of strangeness are experienced. To begin with, we find a daily and normal form of strangeness. This strangeness surrounds us, as that which remains strange inside the very order, such as the unknown passenger in the street or in the shop, or the postman described by Schutz. However, strangeness increases when structural strangeness is considered. We refer here to that which dwells outside a particular order.

Thus, a separation in the life-world opens up between home-world and alien-world. This difference which, as mentioned, stems from Husserl, “corresponds to the well-known difference between in-group and out-group” (Waldenfels 1997: 72), and is at the base of Schutzian distinction.⁸

In line with Husserlian formulation, Schutz also presents the existential element of all human knowledge, namely “the conviction of the essential opacity of our life-world,” in a paradoxical fashion:

We cannot penetrate with the light of our knowledge into all dimensions of it; we may succeed in making some of them semitransparent, and only fractions of the latter translucent. Paradoxically expressed, we are familiar [...] with the fact that large dimensions of our life-world are unknown to us. This is nothing else but another expression for the experience of transcendence which is immanent to our lives. (Schutz 1970: 148f.)

Additionally, “the temporal, spatial and social dimensions of the structure of the life-world are classified along the axis of familiarity and unfamiliarity into distinct and less distinct areas of knowledge” (Srubar 2005: 243). The structurization of our stock of knowledge into levels of familiarity and strangeness is the correlate of our experience of the opacity of the life-world. This gradation of familiarity/strangeness in our stock of knowledge leads us to the second category, “comparative strangeness”. This notion denotes the result of “relational” comparisons between a stock of knowledge that is familiar to us and one that is not. This strangeness in the stock of knowledge can also evince a series of nuances and gradations “that are dependent on the extent of the *reciprocity of perspectives* with which everyday actors encounter” (Srubar 2005: 244; emphasis added). On the one hand, congruency of cultural patterns and their interpretive schemes, which includes structures of relevance and typicality, can be expected amongst members of “in-groups”. Familiarity is a characteristic of the stock of knowledge inherent to a group. Notwithstanding, there are different levels of congruency, and Schutzian general thesis of the reciprocity of perspectives contributes by describing a process which Srubar mentions as “the rule of acceptance of strangeness”. According to Schutz, common-sense thinking overcomes the differences in individual perspectives by two basic idealizations: The idealization of the interchangeability of the standpoints and the idealization of the congruency of the system of relevances (Schutz 1962a: 11f.). To this idealization should be added the idealization of reciprocity of motives, which assumes “my own motives as being interlocked with that of my partners in social interaction” (Schutz 1962a: 39). This idealization depends upon the general thesis of the reciprocity of

⁸ It is important here to mention the different levels of analysis proposed by Husserl and Schutz. For Husserl, the aim is the transition from an ontological-logical consideration (which stops with a pregiven reality) to a transcendental consideration (which inquires even into this pregivenness as such). His reflection “ascends from a mundane alienness, to a transcendental alienness which engenders the genesis of the world” (Waldenfels and Steinbock 1990: 24). However, while Husserl intended to clarify the problem of intersubjectivity in transcendental phenomenology, Schutz found his task in clarifying the problem in the constitutive phenomenology of natural attitude or in the ontology of the life-world (Hamazu 2009: 60).

perspectives, since it implies that the motives imputed to the Other are typically the same as my own or that of others in typically similar circumstances (Schutz 1962a: 23).⁹ Through this set of idealizations, congruency and familiarity in the stock of knowledge can be achieved. The constitution of the Other is based on the assumption of the reciprocity of perspectives. If this reciprocity cannot be accomplished, by means of communication or by any other means, then: “it must be constructed by means of presumptions about others that are inherent in the group or else a relationship to other [...] would be impossible” (Srubar 1999: 37). That construction can be colored by prejudices, as we will show.

On the other hand, incongruity also emerges in social interaction as a consequence of the differentiation of the life-world. Its differentiation is already addressed in the distinction between familiar/unfamiliar which is immanent to the life-world. This can be seen clearly through the idea of “displaced stock of knowledge” in which the stock of knowledge at hand underwent substantive changes because of the modification of the class position of the actors in the social world. Comparative strangeness can also be seen in the case we are dealing with, the experience of the stranger and the obstacles that arise in the attempt at interpreting the approached group that, as mentioned, leads to “incongruence” and “distortion” of the stock of knowledge at hand and the corresponding contour line of the group’s relevance system. It has to be underlined the key role played by the analysis of group relationships in the reflection about comparative strangeness. Schutz bases his theory on Husserl’s life-world analysis. As a result, he conceives the constitution of different group worlds against the background of different schemes of familiarity and unfamiliarity and he sees “the conflict-generating mechanisms of social inclusion and exclusion as inherent to these processes” (Srubar 1999: 38). Therefore, the knowledge of people living their daily life in the social realm is not homogeneous. As Srubar notes, the life-world “cannot be represented as a harmless, domestic place [...] that stands out against the strangeness and the unfamiliarity by means of consensus, homogeneity and freedom from contradiction of its stock of knowledge” (Srubar 2005: 243). There are mechanisms of social modification of the life-world’s everyday core, and this indicates the necessary realization of the life-world structure in different groups. These distinct social groups “are in no way ‘harmoniously’ connected to one another, but rather the experience of their differences and reciprocal strangeness is part of the relatively natural attitude of humans” (Srubar 2005: 244).

The experience of reciprocal congruence and incongruence of the stock of knowledge between groups is the expression in the social realm of the mechanisms

⁹ The reciprocity of perspective also means, as Anthony Steinbock (1995) states, a “reversibility of perspectives” where home and alien are interchangeable and mutually accessible, that is, symmetrically accessible to the same degree. Steinbock is critical of this idea, since he considers that the co-generative structure of home-world/alien-world has an axiological asymmetry. In this respect, he agrees with Emmanuel Levinas, for whom the experience of the Other is the experience of a non-reciprocity, of an asymmetrical relation. This is because the experience of the Other is for Levinas an ethical and not an ontological experience, and because this experience of the face of the Other is the experience of a speaking and not in the first place corporeal presence (Dastur 2011). For a development of this topic see the discussion (Steinbock 1995: 252f.).

of inclusion and exclusion that are firmly entrenched in the emergence of ordering processes. Alienness and ownness are not only “inner-worldly relations of exclusion and inclusion” (Waldenfels and Steinbock 1990: 24), but they are also “the results of drawing boundaries that distinguish an inside from an outside and thus adopt the shapes of inclusion and exclusion” (Waldenfels 2011: 11). Following Sru-bar, if we conceive the political as the redefinition of the reciprocity of the actor’s perspective, then both exclusion and inclusion become clear as its constitutive moments (Sru-bar 1999: 41). In other words, changes in proximity and distance between social groups are at the core of the dynamics in modern societies causing different regimes of social inclusion and exclusion. For this reason, existential strangeness can be socially realized in different forms of discrimination, but it can also be instantiated through institutionalized patterns aiming at the consensual regulation of such tendencies. Thus, Schutzian approach to strangeness is also appropriate for studying the processes suited to decrease the reciprocal incongruence between groups. In that sense, the Schutzian concept of social distance touches on the core of the problem of political order.¹⁰

The following section will explore ways in which the gradation of unfamiliarity, understood as a universal trait of the human condition, is experienced in the social realm. It is shown that the experience of strangeness is organized in the social world into zones of varying social distance between social groups. Just as the alien is both “what is inaccessible and what does not belong to another” (Waldenfels and Steinbock 1990: 22), the structure of “accessible and inaccessible,” on the social level, corresponds to the structure of “belonging in non-belonging”:

Everybody who belongs to a family, people, caste, religious community, or culture never entirely belongs to it. Remoteness, distance, farness, as well as the moments of solitude and being-out-of-place to which phenomenologists often refer in their analyses of alien experience, do not mean a diminishing of this experience; rather, they belong to its essence. (Waldenfels 2011: 35)

In order to delve into the experience of the difference and reciprocal strangeness between groups, the experiences of congruency and incongruity of the stock of knowledge and its correlative cultural pattern are reviewed by analyzing two sources of incongruence: The discrepancy between the definition of the situation in the social world by the group and by the stranger, and the discrepancy between the subjective and the objective interpretation of the group.

¹⁰ Despite its significance, the phenomenological study of the construction of political orders exceeds the aims of this article.

Schutz on Social Distance: From Intimate Familiarity to Strangeness

Familiarity and Strangeness Between Social Groups

Schutz formulates his conception of social distance when discussing equality and the structurization of the social world (Schutz 1964b). As social human beings, we were born into a world already constituted and organized. This world is not only physical but also a sociocultural one, and is the result of historical processes. However:

Certain features [...] are common to all social worlds because they are rooted in the human condition. Everywhere we find sex groups and age groups, and some division of labor conditioned by them; and more or less rigid kinship organizations that arrange the social world into zones of varying *social distance*, from intimate familiarity to strangeness. (Schutz 1964b: 229)

Social distance is defined as the relationships of proximity and distance, familiarity and strangeness between social groups, which is experienced in the social world in terms of “We” and “They”. That distinction is usually approached by sociologists with terms such as “social classes,” “system,” “role,” “status,” and “role expectation,” among others. However, group differences are “experienced by the individual actor on the social scene in entirely different terms” (Schutz 1964b: 232). To the actor in the social world, the social divisions denoted by those concepts are interpreted as elements of “a network of typifications,” i.e., typifications of other human individuals, of their course-of-action patterns, of their motives and goals, or of the sociocultural products which originated in their actions. The world, the physical as well as the sociocultural one, is experienced from the outset in terms of types; the objects of the world are typified, including the cultural ones and, in our particular case, the Other is typified, “there are typical social roles and relationships, such as parents, siblings, kinsmen, strangers, soldiers, hunters, priests, etc.” Moreover, “the ways of life of the in-group,” that is, the socially approved system of typifications and the particular structure of domains of relevances, are taken for granted and are linked to the dynamic of the social structure that exists at any historical moment.

Schutz develops two sources of incongruence in social relationships between groups. The first one is the discrepancy between the definition of the situation in the social world by the group and by the stranger, which is at the origin of the distinction between in-group (We-group) and out-group (Others-group).¹¹ The social world, as taken for granted in common-sense thinking, is articulated in various domains of relevances, each constituted by a set of problem-relevant types. The system of the domains of common relevances is not static. On the contrary, it changes, for example, from generation to generation, and “its dynamic development is one of the main causes for changes in the social structure itself” (Schutz 1964b: 236). Another trait of the domains of relevances is that they are arranged in order of superiority and inferiority, and their order differs from group to group. This means that

¹¹ Schutz states that this distinction is also the foundation of Weber’s concepts of subjective and objective interpretation.

the prevalent order of domains of relevances in a particular social group is itself an element of the relative natural conception of the world taken for granted by the in-group as an unquestioned and familiar way of life. In each group, the order of these domains has its particular history. It is an element of socially approved and socially derived knowledge, and frequently, it is institutionalized. Moreover, the system of typifications and relevances is one of the means by which a group defines its situation within the “social cosmos” and, at the same time, becomes an integral element of the situation itself. Accordingly, social distance between groups is experienced by the actor in the social world in terms of a system of typifications and relevances, as well as in terms of the stock of knowledge determined by their position in the social structure which itself has a particular structure according to its particular history.

The sum-total of the relative natural aspect the social world has for those living within it constitutes “the folkways of the in-group,”¹² which are socially accepted as the “good ways” and the “right ways” for coming to terms with things and fellow human beings. They are taken for granted because they have stood the test so far, and, being socially approved, are held as requiring neither an explanation nor a justification. This “system of folkways” establishes the standard in terms of which the in-group “defines its situation”. However, as previously stated, the knowledge of people who act and think within the world of their daily life is not homogeneous. The position of each social group in the social structure is accompanied by a definition of its situation within the social territory, and the discrepancy between definitions is at the origin of the differences between groups and of the experience of familiarity and strangeness between them.

In contrast to the heterogeneity between social groups with regard to their definition of their situation in the social world, the subjective meaning of the group leads to a homogeneous self-typification. Any group considers itself as “a *cosmion*, a little cosmos” which is illuminated from within. A “central myth” governs the ideas of a concrete group, and such a myth goes through a process of rationalization and institutionalization. This “central myth” can also be referred to as “scheme of self-interpretation,” belonging to the relative natural conception of the world the We-group takes for granted. The subjective meaning of the group, that is, the meaning a group has for its members, can be described in terms of “a feeling” among the members that they belong together, or as a feeling of “integration” and “sharing of common interests” (Schutz 1964b: 251). This subjective meaning that the group has for its members consists in their knowledge of a common situation and a common system of typifications and relevances. This situation has a history in which the individual members’ biographies have participated. Here, the individual members are “at home,” that is, they find their bearings without difficulty in the common surroundings, guided by a set of recipes of more or less institutionalized habits, mores, folkways, etc., that help them come to terms with fellow-human beings belonging

¹² The term “Folkways” was originally coined by William Graham Sumner and refers to the learned behavior and social conventions shared by the members of a group. Schutz makes use of this concept in the context of his reflexion of the relationship between in-group [*Eigengruppe*] and out-group [*Fremdgruppe*].

to the same situation. The system of typifications and relevances, shared with the other members of the group, defines the social role, position, and status of each. The acceptance of a common system of relevances leads the members of the group to a homogeneous self-typification. This description of the subjective meaning of group membership is “a purely formal one” and refers neither to the nature of the bond that holds the group together, nor to the extent, duration, or intimacy of the social contact; therefore, it is equally applicable to a marriage or a business enterprise, and so forth.

According to this review, different dimensions can be highlighted for the study of social distance between groups, whether they be affective (“a feeling” shared by the members that they belong together), interactive (the nature of the bond that holds the group together, and the extent, duration, or intimacy of the social contact), or cultural (the ways of life of the in-group, i.e., the socially approved system of typifications and particular structure of the domains of relevances). However, another trait must be taken into account. Social distance also refers to the different attitudes and valuations of a group toward alterity in terms of acceptance, tolerance, intolerance, hostility, confrontation and discrimination, among others. As mentioned, although the gradation of unfamiliarity is a general category of our interpretation of the world, its cultural and historical construction is a different matter. A disposition to accept and incorporate the Other is not part of the human condition. This leads to the second source of incongruence in social relationships between groups: the discrepancy between the subjective and the objective interpretation of the group. This discrepancy can be explained by the fact that the folkways of Others are imposed upon us in the social world. The system of relevances and typifications of Others may seem strange and opaque to us. This opacity of the stranger, i.e., the invisible aspects of the Other that emerge in social interaction, can be filled with multiple social meanings. The opacity of the Other could trigger an interplay between imposed and intrinsic relevances, and consequently, the “invisible excess” of meaning in group relationships could become a source of dispute.

The Conceptual Construction of the Other as a Stranger

According to Schutz, one’s own group considers itself as the centre of everything and all others are scaled, rated and valued in reference to it (Schutz 1964b: 244). The members of an out-group do not consider the ways of life of the in-group as self-evident truths. Neither article of faith nor historical tradition commits them to accept as right and good the folkways of any group other than their own. Not only their central myth but also the processes of its rationalization and institutionalization are different (Schutz 1964b: 245). Each group thinks that its own folkways are the only right ones, and if it observes that other groups have other folkways, valuation processes emerge on the social scene. The alien-world of the Other appears coloured by the prejudices of the home-world. It is not only “excluded” and discriminated against, but it is also devalued; its valuations, cognitions, and normativity “are not valid” in relation to the home-world. The alien-world constitutes a potential threat to concepts of *the* world and to *the* humanity

from the point of view of the home-world (Rizo-Patrón 2010: 101). In social life, we do not only value things and ideas, but also people and groups. Sociological inquiry on valuation suggests that valuation concerns “how people, things and ideas are ordered in relation to one another” (Kjellberg and Mallard 2013: 17). The process of valuation refers to the way social groups assign meaning to what they do, as well as to their transactions with things and people. In this context, it is worthwhile to reexamine the question: “In which ways do actors define, categorize, measure, compare, value, and evaluate situations around?” (Cefai et al. 2015: 2). In other words, in which ways do groups define, categorize, measure, compare, value and evaluate other groups?

Schutz contributes to answering this question through an analysis of Kipling’s poem “We and They” by reciting this line: “All the people like us are We. And everyone else is They” (Schutz 1964b: 243). The end of each stanza of the poem makes clear how the Others-group could be valued not only as “a sort of They,” but also as “a simply disgusting They,” “an utterly ignorant They,” or “a quite impossible They” (Kipling 1926: 327f.). The outsider measures the standards prevailing in the group under consideration in accordance with the system of relevances prevailing within the natural aspect the world has for his home-group. Without a formula of transformation, that would permit the translation of the system of relevances and typifications prevailing in the group under consideration into that of the home-group, the ways of the former remain un-understandable; but frequently, *they are considered to be of minor value and inferior* (Schutz 1964b: 246; emphasis added).

However, it is important to understand that the self-interpretation by the in-group and the interpretation of the in-group’s natural conception of the world by the out-group are frequently interrelated. On the one hand, the we-group may feel misunderstood by the Others-group, and this “may lead to a partial shift of the system of relevances prevailing within the in-group, namely, by originating a solidarity of resistance against outside criticism”. The out-group is then looked at with repugnance, disgust, aversion, antipathy, hatred, or fear. Consequently, a “vicious circle” can be set up because the out-group, by the changed reaction of the in-group, is reinforced in its interpretation of the traits of the in-group as highly detestable. Such a situation may lead to various attitudes of the in-group toward the out-group; the in-group may stick to its way of life and try to change the attitude of the out-group by an educational process of spreading information, or by persuasion, or by appropriate propaganda. Alternatively, the in-group may try to adjust its way of thinking to that of the out-group by at least partially accepting the latter’s pattern of relevances.

Moreover, this leads to the second source of incongruity, the discrepancy between the subjective and the objective interpretation of the group. According to Schutz, in objective interpretation the notion of the group is a conceptual construct of the outsider. By this operation of his system of typifications and relevances, he subsumes individuals showing certain characteristics and traits under a social category that is homogeneous in his, the outsider’s, point of view (Schutz 1964b: 255). In the words of Schutz, the interpretation of the group by the outsider will never fully coincide with the self-interpretation of the in-group, i.e., the relevances imposed by the outsider will not match with the intrinsic relevances of the in-group. For this reason, the system of relevances leading to such typification is taken for granted by the outsider,

but is not necessarily accepted by the individuals who may not be prepared to perform a corresponding self-typification:

The resultant discrepancy between the subjective and the objective interpretation of the group remains relatively harmless, so long as the individuals thus typified are not subject to the outsider's control [...] If, however, the outsider has the power to impose his system of relevances upon the individuals typified by him, and especially to enforce its institutionalization, then this fact will create various repercussions on the situation of the individuals typified against their will. (Schutz 1964b: 255)¹³

If the Other is compelled to identify himself as a whole with that particular trait or characteristic which places him in terms of the imposed system of heterogeneous relevances into a social category he had never included as a relevant one in the definition of his private situation, then he may feel that he is no longer treated as a human being, but is degraded to an interchangeable specimen of the typified class. He is alienated from himself, a mere representation of typified traits and characteristics. Schutz states that the feeling of degradation caused by the identification of the whole, or broad layers, of the individual's personality with the imposed typified trait is one of the basic motives for the subjective experience of discrimination: "The imposition of social categories both creates the 'group' and invests it with a fictitious scheme of relevances that can then be manipulated at will by the creator of the type". Thus, discrimination¹⁴ presupposes both imposition of a typification from the objective point of view and an appropriate evaluation of this imposition from the subjective viewpoint of the afflicted individual (Schutz 1964b: 260f.). It is important to mention here that the strangeness of Others and their folkways is one of the experiences which derives from the transcendence of the Other in the social realm. The "invisible excess of sense" in group relationships that emerges as a consequence of the transcendence and strangeness of the Other in the social world, constitutes a source of dispute, which triggers an interplay between imposed and intrinsic relevances or, in other words, between objective and subjective interpretation of the group. Individuals might be typified against their will by an out-group with the power to impose its own system of relevances. The opacity of the stranger may then

¹³ As Schutz mentions, strictly speaking, nearly all administrative and legislative measures involve the placing of individuals under imposed social categories.

¹⁴ It should be mentioned that not all typifications lead to a reification process of the Other; in the same way that not all typifications are discriminatory. In this respect, Schutz' account of intersubjectivity does not suffer from the antipathy characteristic of the Sartrean view, since one does not relate "allergically" to another consciousness appearing on the scene (Barber 2001). According to Sartre, a relationship between the I-subject and the Other-subject is impossible. Either I am the object and the Other is the subject or vice versa (Schutz 1962b: 198). Indeed, Sartre's theory of "We" marks the difference between a "We-subject" and a "We-object". Schutz reformulates Sartre's idea that the subjective orientation towards the *Other* implies "converting the *Other* into an object" into the idea of "using inadequate types or typifications from an objective point of view without sufficient sensibility towards the subjective meaning of the Other". In this sense, he understands that intersubjectivity involves two subjectivities: "[b]oth seize one another as a co-performing subjectivity" (Schutz 1962b: 203).

be filled with social meanings belonging to the out-group; this imposition of social categories upon individuals can lead to processes of discrimination.

However, there are different ways in which the in-group defines, categorizes, measures, compares, values and evaluates other groups, which may lead to various attitudes of the in-group toward the out-group:

A complete typology cannot be established on the ground of theoretical deliberations, but a wide field seems open here for badly needed empirical research. Such research would also have to consider the particular personal types involved—for example, the stranger who wants to be accepted by the approached group, the convert, the renegade, the marginal man, and also the various attitudes developed by the in-group toward these types. In all these situations, major problems of equality and equal opportunity are involved. (Schutz 1964b: 248)

Without doubt, a Schutzian phenomenological approach to the study of social distance represents a qualitative leap towards a more comprehensive study of the phenomenon. It allows for the analysis of the experience of proximity/strangeness, the so-called “gradation of unfamiliarity,” as a general category of our interpretation of the world and as a preliminary condition for the constitution of social distance. Furthermore, it permits within the social realm the exploration of cultural and historical construction of social distance between groups. The experience of the Other, considered as a stranger by the out-group, is an extreme case in which we, as human beings, experience one of these poles of gradation in the social world. At the other end of the spectrum, it is possible to find intimate and familiar experiences, as in the case of friendship, which stresses the close bond that characterizes those intersubjective relationships.¹⁵ Moreover, a Schutzian phenomenological approach lays the foundation for the construction of different types of strangers based on empirical research. Different attitudes toward the out-group can be researched. The Other can transcend us as a group and, in this sense, the out-group can be considered as a stranger. However, the attitudes toward the out-group can range widely from acceptance to confrontation. The types of stranger constructed by social scientists, as mentioned in the last quotation, should build upon empirical research and follow the postulate of adequacy: “each term used in a scientific system referring to human action must be so constructed that a human act performed within the life-world by an individual actor in the way indicated by the typical construction would be reasonable and understandable for the actor himself as well as for his fellow-man” (Schutz 1964a: 19).

¹⁵ For a more detailed discussion on this topic see (Dreher 2009).

Concluding remarks

A phenomenological approach to the study of social distance requires a twofold analysis that, on one hand, takes into account the preliminary conditions for the constitution of social distance and, on the other, the socio-historical expressions of the phenomenon. This paper first described the sources of unfamiliarity/strangeness contained in the structure of the life-world, and argued that the experience of strangeness is a trait of our human condition and of our experience of the life-world. It further asserted that the mechanisms of social modification of life-world's core, which expresses the plasticity of acts of consciousness, indicate the necessary realization of the life-world structure in different groups. In this respect, the paper also established the need to empirically explore the gradation of unfamiliarity in relation to social and cultural intersubjectivity. Closely connected, the experience of incongruence can emerge in social interaction between groups as a consequence of the differentiation of the life-world: "the life-world has not in any way manifested itself as a homogenous cultural world [...] but as a formal structure that is differentiated by its constitutive mechanisms and that generates heterogeneity" (Srubar 2005: 247). The transcendence and inaccessibility of the Other represent an omnipresent source of unfamiliarity/strangeness that is contained in the life-world structure and is filled with social meanings in the context of its cultural and historical construction. However, as mentioned, a disposition to accept and incorporate the Other is not in our human condition; the heterogeneity of the social world expresses itself in different sources of incongruence in social relationships between groups. The most important focus of our inquiry has been the discrepancy between the subjective and the objective interpretation of the group. Strangeness of Others and their folkways are imposed upon us, and the invisible excess of sense in group relationships constitutes a source of dispute, which can trigger an interplay between imposed and intrinsic relevances. The opacity of the stranger can be filled with multiple meanings. Discrimination is one of the different attitudes through which the in-group values other groups. Accordingly, the phenomenological concept of social distance allows for both disclosing underlying mechanisms of social differentiation and for explaining the social construction of the Other as a stranger, as well as the particular attitudes between groups which might lead to xenophobia, racism or discrimination.

Returning to the issue set forth at the beginning of this paper, Coronavirus disease appears to be an emerging criterion for the construction of a new ideal type of stranger. In this regard, the distinction between "We" and "They," seems to be reconfigured along new lines. Official government statements made around the globe use a militaristic rhetoric that constructs COVID-19 as an "invisible enemy".¹⁶ This public rhetoric seems to be having an impact on the reconfigurations of existing social divisions. Connected with this public discourse of COVID-19 as an enemy, a new paradigmatic type of stranger, to whom all negative attitudes are directed, emerges

¹⁶ "Every American has a role to play in defending our nation from this invisible, horrible enemy," said the president of the United States in a public conference on March 21st 2020. However, militaristic imagery is not unique to government leaders, news media and social media in the USA; it is possible to find similar imagery being propagated in different parts of the world.

in the social field. This new type of stranger becomes amalgamated in the figure of the stranger as a “potential enemy” (Karakayali 2009: 557). As mentioned, discrimination involves not only the imposition of social categories or, in Schutzian terms, the imposition of a typification from the objective point of view, that identify the stranger as a whole with a particular trait or characteristic, i.e., as “a source of infection”. Additionally, it implies “an appropriate” evaluation of this imposition from the subjective viewpoint of the typified individual: “They called me leper. They treat me as if I were an enemy”.¹⁷ Here, the “invisible enemy” is transformed into the “potential enemy,” someone who can be located in the social sphere. In addition, negative and confrontational attitudes, ranging from crimes and physical violence to harassment, are held against the members of groups associated with the pandemic. This ideal type of the “stranger,” in Schutzian terms, can be occupied by many different groups according to the characteristics of each society. It may be true that the category of the stranger “is often occupied by the ethnic and racial minorities in a society,” those people who have immigrated from elsewhere (Karakayali 2009: 545). This is the case with the ideal type being proposed. However, it is not only Asian Americans and other people of Asian descent being identified as the “potential enemy” ideal type, but also other foreign workers and Muslims, patients infected by COVID-19, people tested for coronavirus, health professionals, and the list goes on.

The ideas presented in this article do not pretend to exhaust the complexity of this issue nor to fully reflect the processes of discrimination connected to the pandemic. On the contrary, it suggests that, given the present context, this could be a fruitful starting point for further inquiry into the constitution and treatment of the social and cultural Other (see also Marotta 2000). The phenomenon of discrimination reinforced by the pandemic could be explored using conceptual tools prescribed by a phenomenological approach to the study of social distance. In this way, phenomenology provides a solid conceptual framework for continued discourse, from which the social sciences will undoubtedly benefit.

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¹⁷ Testimony of a patient infected by COVID-19 in Argentina taken from a Journal article. See Chaluf (2020).

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