

## Proximity and Difference

To be foreign is signified not only by oneself, but also by others as much as the social conditions itself. It is not really an *ontological* characteristic of someone but rather constituted by a distinct setting. In this sense, the term and social role of “*The Stranger*” which Alfred Schutz explores in his essay of the same name is fully situational: A stranger can be a stranger only if s\*he is in an unfamiliar environment. Following Schutz’ analysis, the stranger ceases to be a stranger anymore once s\*he has adopted the patterns and absorbed the body of knowledge of the social group s\*he is encountering.

Schutz’ paper draws from his own experience as an Austrian immigrant of Jewish descent in the United States in the 40ies. His thought is a combination of a background in social phenomenology informed by Husserl and Weber, and the influence of his later working environment at the New School in New York.

However in our contemporary world, Schutz’ understanding seems to be out-fashioned insofar that today’s societies do not consist of homogeneous groups (if they ever did) and ways of living which could be simply adopted as such by any stranger. Furthermore, current theories also focus on the disparities of someone perceiving her\*himself as a stranger and being labeled or seen as one.

Nevertheless, there seems to remain a systematic gap between either taking a sociological point of view, focused on social groups and interactions, or pursuing a purely phenomenological inquiry on the encounter of “the Other” and the outside world as fundamental experiences of alienation. My talk aims to bridge these two theoretically divided domains based on the readings of Schutz. I intend to utilize the phenomenological concept of the “*Lebenswelt*” beyond its purely theoretical scope as the place in which not only (i) direct experience and personal encounter necessarily take place but which is also (ii) determined by social reality, actions and attributions that persist.

The title “Proximity and Difference” challenges the traditional equation of spatial distance and cultural differences, and interlaces these separate domains in reverse order.

*The presentation will be based on an assignment (“Hausarbeit”) on the same subject which is yet to be written.*

*I prefer speaking in English since the language seems the most inclusive to me. Especially on a students level there is a lack of representation as well as programme for non-German speakers in Germany which is why there appears to be little exchange between German-speaking and international students staying temporarily or permanently. My aim is to contribute to this necessary and worthwhile discourse. However, if there are particular reasons I am able to speak in German as well.*