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OTHERING

Why read this text..

In its broadest sense, othering is a basic cognitive process of becoming a self and orienting oneself out in the world. Most commonly the term othering refers to a process where an individual or a group is perceived by an individual or group (the "Self"), as being different ("the Other") in some fundamental way and, thus, not belonging to the same socio-cultural entity (category). The "Self" acts as being the norm and evaluates those who do not meet that norm as the "Other". Perceived as lacking the essential characteristics of the "Self", the "Other" is seen and treated as inferior and potentially as a threat.

Using an example from the educational sector, an act of othering is the differentiation among students on the basis of different cultural (i.e. language, social class and religious affiliation, ethnic or national origin, race) and/or biological (bodily features) characteristics. Derogatory nicknames or students being bullied or racially harassed by other students because of their national origin are examples in case. In a similar vein, teachers, or parents, engage in an act of othering that has discriminatory effects when they regard a student, or group of students, as deviant because of their skin colour, sex, sexuality etc. Protests by parents against migrant or refugee children who have been given the right to schooling are another example.

Historical Context

The concept of othering has a deep intellectual genealogy across the fields of philosophy, psychology, critical theory and post-colonial studies. It is part of a scholarly effort to understand the process of identification and categorisation, the construction of "Self" and "Other" and the ways social relations are enacted and experienced in the course of social life. From a phenomenological perspective, othering is the constitutive factor in creating and affirming the Self-image. The "Other" is the counterpart created by the "Self" in order for him/her/it to be defined (San Martín 2017). Adopting a feminist perspective, the "Other" refers to what it means to "be a woman". Women find themselves in a subordinate social position with respect to men, who are considered the normative existential condition (De Beauvoir 1949).

In the colonial era, the practise of othering justified the physical domination and cultural subordination of the colonized people by the "West". Non-European/non-Western countries are placed in a distant symbolic space compared to the "West", which is considered as the normative centre of the world. Orientalism stands out as a prominent pattern example of the othering practice, being understood as an image of the world that relegates the culture, values, ways of life, and institutions of the "Eastern" (and primarily Muslim) "peoples" and "cultures" to a subordinate position with respect to the "Westerners" (Said 1978).

In the contemporary times of intensified and diversified migration and (ethno-religious)



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conflict, the process of othering concerns the relations between minorities and majorities and involves claims for rights to culture. In this context, otherness reifies specific cultural and/or (presumed) biological characteristics which are implied to be the significant identifying boundaries on the basis of which to distinguish different groups. Cultural and biological differences are deemed as indicators of difference (Benhabib 2002). Othering results, then, into ascribing an inferior identity to a group with respect to one's own and affecting in material and socio-political (usually negative) ways the actors involved (Wilson & Mitchell 2003).

a) Discussion

In anthropological terms, othering describes the reductive action of labelling and defining a person or a group as someone who belongs to a socially subordinate category. Claims about culture are the essential tool in creating the "Other" (Abu-Lughod 1991). The condition and quality of being the "Other" is the state of being different than and opposite of the individual and/or collective "Self".

The notion of othering refers to the process of classification, which entails the division of people, objects, and other phenomena according to socially pre-established categories or types. The classification of persons and groups as "Others" and "Selves" is explored by Durkheim and Mauss in their famous book *Primitive Classification* (2009 [1903]). The core idea is that patterns of thought are a social product associated with social organization. Thus, different societies produce different kinds of thought and understandings of the social world and the "Self" and the "Other". Prior to that, Victorian anthropology produced otherness by classifying and evaluating societies based on ideas about progress and cultural evolution. Later in the 20th century, Levi Strauss (1955) claimed that people have two strategies in dealing with the "Other"; incorporate them by reducing any boundaries between them or exclude them by founding restrictions and keeping them in the margins.

Othering in anthropology refers to power-related processes of identification and categorization. It has been seen as a form of political exclusion generated by ethnic, national religious and other ideologies and enforced by social institutions and/or informal social structures. This process involves asymmetries in socio-political power in a given social system (Jenkins 1996). Michel Foucault has argued, that, when we name a group as the "Other" we point out their perceived weaknesses in order highlight a relationship between subordinates and superordinates. The dominant group is in a position to impose its strength and superiority to the "Other" while devaluing them (Foucault 2000a, b).

b) Practical Example

The process of othering as it is performed in the classroom is explored in a study of the ways Norwegian teacher educators introduce aspects of cultural diversity to pre-service teachers during a mandatory course on "Pedagogy and Pupil Knowledge" (Nilsen, Fylkesnes & Mausesthaugen 2017). The study finds that the teacher educators talk about 'cultural diversity' as something that concerns the "Others". The "Others" are the pupils and parents, who differ from the teacher educators in that they have different cultures, languages, migratory histories and religions and are visibly and socially different. (ibid 43).



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The authors describe this way of talking as a discourse practice of othering in which the 'ordinary' represents us and the 'unordinary' represents them via implicit or explicit discursively constructed contrasts (ibid 44). Othering occurs in practices relating to culture, social aspects, multilingualism, migration, nationality, visibility and religion (ibid 48). The study argues that the ongoing and taken-for-granted production of othering in the classroom may lead to the social exclusion of pupils (ibid 42). The awareness of the ways in which pupils are 'othered' in society is an important tool in dealing with unequal power relations and promoting social justice and equity (41) in demographically diverse societies (ibid 48).

In another study (Borero et. al. 2012), schools are examined as cultural contexts that have the power and potential to "other" youth in a way that keeps them from creating meaningful academic identities, whereas they should promote students' cultural assets. Native Hawaiian adolescents and teachers and counsellors of Native Hawaiian youth talk about their experiences in urban public schools in Hawaii (ibid 8-13). Othering is defined as a personal, social, cultural, and historical experience involving cultural and racial ambiguity, categorization and labelling, hierarchical power dynamics, and limited access to resources. The school environment dynamics reveals multiple identities, stereotypes, racism, coping strategies for racism, and cultural pride that relate to experiences with being the "other" at school (ibid 3-6).

The study stresses the need for educators to provide opportunities that promote and reinforce strategies that counter experiences of marginalization and offer a sense of inclusion and belonging. Identity-making should be fostered and supported through educational opportunities and interactions that positively prioritize diversity in intercultural settings and help to transform schools to cultural contexts that celebrate cultural richness (ibid 16-30).

Thinking further:

- How can I see and reflect upon my own ways of classifying people as "Others" in verbal, cognitive and symbolic ways?
- In what contexts and social interactions can I observe processes of othering?
- What can I do to increase awareness of my students in being conscious and mindful of avoiding othering?
- How can I motivate and inspire my students to value cultural diversity as a positive and enriching feature of social life?

KEY-WORDS/ CROSS-REFERENCES

Classification, power, identity, diversity-difference, ethnocentrism, marginalisation, discrimination, culture

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