

Incongruous Encounters: Schizophrenia, Intersubjectivity and Transdisciplinary Research

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Transdisciplinary research takes us a step *beyond* the interdisciplinary approach: while interdisciplinarity is concerned with the transfer of methods across disciplinary boundaries, transdisciplinary research agendas have the potential to transcend altogether the divisions rigidly established among academic disciplines. Yet, importantly, what there is to transcend once one is looking to go beyond the interdisciplinary approach is not simply the disciplinarity inherent in our scientific and philosophical practices. Transdisciplinary enterprises are capable of conceptualizing not only gaps in our knowledge that fall outside of the purview of the disciplines, but also those foundational aspects of our understanding and of the human condition that disciplinary, multidisciplinary and even interdisciplinary approaches, since they lack a unified or holistic approach, fail to recognize as problematic.

As a perplexing condition, as a challenging intersubjective encounter, and as a real-life problem demanding transdisciplinary research, schizophrenia is a problem unique in its ability to illuminate the distinction I outline above between a transdisciplinary as opposed to an “agglomeratedly” disciplinary approach. Though no doubt a genuinely human condition requiring humane treatment, more often than not schizophrenia is relegated to the role of the “counter-example” in its potential services to the scientific examiner. Through the failures of schizophrenic persons we might understand our successful negotiations of selfhood and alterity, a

boundary characteristically fluid in schizophrenic thinking; through their disordered experience we are able to appreciate the automatic and smoothly functioning syntheses of self-consciousness by virtue of which we call ourselves sane rather than psychotic. In the following paper, my aim is to do the opposite: to submit to analysis our own failures and occasional delusions by leveraging the schizophrenic experience for conceptualizing what the practice of transdisciplinarity entails.

Once we extend the intersubjective sphere in which our interactions, bracketing any normative distinction between normal and abnormal, must include meaningful contact with schizophrenic individuals, vexing problems come to the fore almost immediately. When we engage schizophrenic persons as equal parties in our human relationships, we must also relax several principles that normal persons rely on for navigating an intersubjective sphere collectively shared. To some of these, schizophrenic persons stubbornly take exception.

I only note some of the most prominent of the phenomena we come across in these interactions. Schizophrenic persons apparently in a state of apathy and detachment often and unexpectedly smile or engage in an effort to be humorous. They are often engaged in a compulsive search to come up with the rules of social behavior, and they search for rules the more passionately the more implicit these supposed “rules” are. Just a few quotes should be able to illustrate this tendency: “As a little girl I used to watch my cousins to see when was the right moment to laugh, or to see how they were able to act without having to think it all through first.” “I lack the backbone of rules of social life. I’ve spent whole afternoons at parks

observing how others interact with each other.” “I’d like to graft a file of discourses onto my memory which I could pull up at the right time.” “I feel inadequate and it’s such a pain – I have come up with algorithms to go and talk with some guy” (Stanghellini: 2004).

What makes it possible for normal persons to share in another person’s experience is that implicit intercorporeal exchanges – the transfer of the body schema in one’s observations of the other, especially in so far that it relies on the gestures and bodily expressions – are a trustworthy grounding for our more explicit communications. The above are examples of the hyper-reflexive schizophrenic stance that seeks to integrate into explicit rules behavioral norms which function in individuals the more successfully the less they are attended to reflectively. For the “normal” person, reliance on a seamless co-constitution of these behavioral standards is the cornerstone of establishing meaningful contact with the other. In contrast, in schizophrenic persons the expectation is that they are going to be given proper time and space in which to “process” the information they gain about the other for their reaction. The more they detect that such respect for their style of interaction is not present, the more they are likely to approach common-sense and axiomatic claims with skepticism. “Interpersonal mental bonds are total death for me,” one of them might note; “I reject my tendency towards identifying myself with what others say,” another warn us; and “I don’t understand why this has to be called a table, and if the sun’s out we have to say it’s a nice day,” one of them might conclude to signal his or her eventual decision to end our conversation (quotes from Stanghellini: 2004).

When interacting with schizophrenics, that which otherwise enables us to define our commonly shared experiences with increasing conceptual precision must itself be made the subject of our inquiry. This common-sensical world of intercorporeality, from the schizophrenic perspective, is a miraculous achievement. The schizophrenic body, at times fractured, at other times not delimited enough from the world, but at any rate so disordered that it does not allow for an easy transfer of the body schema of a self ascended to the stage of narcissism, just does not allow for such attunement. The schizophrenic person places himself or herself in the middle of these situations through reflective acts aimed at establishing what is law-like in these behaviors, rather than through intermotor functions inherent in pre-reflexive bodily awareness.

In this intersubjective sphere inclusive of schizophrenic individuals, the very condition of possibility for a smooth and automatic alignment of various subjective perspectives is removed. In fact, if such an alignment ever takes place between a schizophrenic and a non-schizophrenic individual, it itself is what requires explanation. What needs to be defined for mapping ourselves in contrast with the schizophrenic other (and the schizophrenic other in contrast with ourselves) is the possibility of such an incongruous encounter, an encounter in which two persons irrefutably other to each other nevertheless find a way to interact.

Already it should be apparent that I am not merely taking my cues from schizophrenic persons to illustrate what I think is the crucial difference between a crossdisciplinary and a transdisciplinary approach. Rather, what I am trying to point out is that the integration of work efforts or perspectives is hardly the only thing

required for transdisciplinary cooperation. In the case of interacting with schizophrenics, creative and novel practices must be developed to meet the challenges stemming from our incongruity. Similarly, in academia our very definition of intersubjectivity, especially in so far that it applies to our academic endeavors, must be transformed in order to practice transdisciplinary research. Rather than pursuing projects that artificially impose a congruence upon our various perspectives, we must recognize the potential in the undeniable incongruence of academic disciplines. In our academic collaborations too we are always and necessarily separated – not merely by obstacles social or institutional in nature, but by our total and undeniable difference. Relishing in difference however has ample potential to inform the norms we must observe while pursuing transdisciplinary projects in academia.

Another piece of the puzzle complicates this picture even further – as soon as we consider the non-schizophrenic person’s experience of the encounter with schizophrenics. The non-schizophrenic person is attuned to the gestures, the body language and the mood of the other – each of us to a differing degree, of course, but our vulnerability consists in not being able to disentangle ourselves from the intersubjective clues encountered in a given interaction. The vulnerability of the schizophrenic person is precisely the opposite: for them, the distance from the other is prominent, and therefore they seek for mechanistic rules in explanation of what is required of them if they are to express themselves intelligibly. As it is well known to those who are in personal contact with schizophrenics, even though the structure of our interactions must necessarily accommodate a gulf of separation from the acute

schizophrenic person (a sense of “I” as opposed to “thou” could not be more pronounced in the non-schizophrenic observer even in the most humanistic encounters of this sort) it is impossible for the non-schizophrenic person not to relate to a schizophrenic person and to be drawn into the influence of this other.

Under these circumstances, not only do non-schizophrenics seek out others for understanding them through empathy, but they also find it close to impossible not to approach them without allowing for a specific type of coloring in their experience of encountering another embodied subjectivity. The possibility of access to the experience of the other through empathic understanding is not simply a condition of possibility we take for granted in these encounters, but a compulsive exercise that only a reflective search for identifying the precise mechanisms at work in our projective constitution of the others can correct. This is the ultimate conflict between schizophrenic and non-schizophrenic: the schizophrenic requires, for the proper understanding of his or her condition, that we approach him or her without assuming matters of common sense by which we intuit the existence and the nature of another person’s thoughts, perceptions, feelings and sensations – while the non-schizophrenic person cannot but become deeply steeped in the schizophrenic person’s condition as it is made understandable from his or her perspective.

What is at stake is the proper formulation of the structure of an intersubjective situation involving two irreconcilable modalities of being with an other. The experience of such an encounter entails a determinate impression of having made an acquaintance of someone who we are hesitant to say we have properly met but with whom we nevertheless interact in an encounter that could

hardly be more revealing for understanding both the person we are not and the person we therefore must be – nothing more and nothing less than that. It seems to me that we are separated in these incongruous encounters not merely by an age-old institutional bias and our craving to be normal from our counterparts, but by our inability to articulate a feasible alternative for engaging with them. Because schizophrenic and non-schizophrenic persons can engage in successful encounters, of course. What is more, not only is it feasible to build an egalitarian relationship, but also a relationship in which therapeutic and intellectual progress takes place in the two participants of the incongruous encounter. The contributions of the two parties need not align in a “what” of understanding – we must not assume that what we learn *from* the schizophrenic person is what there is to know *about* the schizophrenic person. Yet, incongruously – without assuming any kind of correspondence in the two party’s experiences, and of their understanding of one another – we can interact even beyond the “normal” boundaries of intersubjective relationships, for as long as we are able to keep separate what are essentially two distinct aspects of these “research” efforts.

One of these is the philosophical aspect: reflections on the ethical dimensions of the relationship of self and other in various efforts to understand one another – much in the same vein in which my paper proceeded thus far. A short summary of a cautionary tale might help to clarify its second aspect with the positive lesson for transdisciplinary research.

Both Freud and Bleuler famously warned us that schizophrenic patients were unsuitable candidates for psychoanalysis. They both operated under the scientific

view of the time, according to which the progression of schizophrenia was irreversible. They were able to offer additional arguments for their view too: namely, that schizophrenia prevented a person from engaging in transference. Neurotic persons, according to Freud, are able to recognize repressed contents precisely at the moment of being revealed in analysis. At this point, they engage in what is called transference resistance, in displacing their unconscious conflicts on the person of the psychoanalysts. They thus repeating the same forms of behavior in analysis in which their neurosis originates, which are therefore in this moment are revealed in their immediate significance: as psychic mechanisms motivating the behavior of the patient. Freud thought that while schizophrenics did engage in transference resistance, their inability to attune in the same intersubjective world shared by the analyst prevented them from recognizing their psychic conflicts as such.

Contemporary approaches to the psychoanalysis of schizophrenic patients have resolved this mystery of the schizophrenic patient's original transference-resistance. When working with a schizophrenic person, the analyst finds herself or himself under the influence of unusually strong counter-transference reactions: schizophrenic patients induce a sense of hopelessness about the success of the therapy and prompt the analyst to help the patient along. Both of these interventions inhibit the patient's progress by perpetuating a situation that would require the recognition not of the patient's, but of the analyst's unconscious conflicts in his or her emotional response to the patient. Recognizing the role of the therapist's own resistance to counter-transference in the analytic setting,

subsequent modifications to Freud's theory resulted in a successful therapeutic method for treating schizophrenics. Though the relationship between schizophrenic and non-schizophrenic individuals in this specific type of interaction may never be disentangled entirely – it must be done on a case-by-case basis, to varying levels of perfection – when prioritizing what helped along the performance of the interaction, rather than the knowledge thereby obtained about the nature of the psychotic and the non-psychotic person participating in the interaction, does indeed allow us to engage in a successful co-operation alongside these fundamental divides.

Similarly, in our academic enterprises too our ability to detect another person's "form" of thinking, to understand him or her by the "style" of his behavior, and to posit, through empathic understanding, their motivation or measure of success allows us to reach over beyond the gap but not to delude ourselves into thinking that we have transcended it. There are two ways in which we can overreach in this regard, and these two approaches seem to me to be academic attitudes that might undermine philosophical efforts both when composed in the interdisciplinary fashion and when pursued in solitude. The first of these is what one might call "schizophrenic autism" – the behavior of many schizophrenic individuals who, withdrawn from the world and barricaded from it due to their severed relationship with the world hyper-reflectively analyze ever narrower problems. This is not unlike the behavior of sciences quarantined beyond their chosen specializations targeting problems that are living and animating problems only for those occupying the same debilitating and isolated intellectual stance.

The second of these, I would argue, is inherent in the impulse for interdisciplinary work, though by no means unavoidable: this is the attitude of the psychiatrist all too eager to explain the schizophrenic person on the basis of assumptions that are fundamental for his or her way of understanding psychic phenomena while forgetting that the same conditions of possibility may not be necessary for the schizophrenic person's experience.

The best approach toward these incongruous encounters – which remains a balancing act no matter how experienced its practitioner is – is to allow appropriate space for the “object” of inquiry to remain indeterminate. What is more, since as philosophers we are usually resistant to leaving an object of inquiry indeterminate, paradoxical or aporetic, we must be able to properly observe our limits: the limits not of our understanding, but that between an understanding performable even in transdisciplinary collaborations and an understanding which, while to us seems limitless, is merely an extension of our own disciplinary autism.

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