A Shift in Mindset: Lévinas as Inspiration
Otherness instead of difference and sameness
Nørgaard, Britta Kusk

Publication date:
2016

Citation for published version (APA):
A Shift in Mindset: Lévinas as Inspiration: Otherness instead of difference and sameness

Lecturer, ph.d. Britta Nørgaard, UCN, Denmark: bkn@ucn.dk

Background

My research and some experiences from different arenas:
The background for this paper is an ongoing curiosity towards a strange – and probably very tenacious - phenomenon. I have a ph.d.-work behind me, where I analyzed the professional encounter between the professional in a broad social field and the adult human being with some intellectual – and often invisible –impairment. My focus was the quality of this encounter related to (social philosophical) values as recognition, understanding, dignity and autonomy.

In my work I found a surprising silence about this area and about people with intellectual and invisible impairments from this point of view. Very few philosophers take an interest in these people in a positive sense. Kittay and Carlsson are the exceptions who try to give voice to this area, e.g. in *Cognitive Disability and its Challenge to Moral Philosophy*” (Kittay et al.:2010).

In the disability research you might see some of the explanation to this distance to the area. Waldschmidt refers to Foucault, when she says: *disability studies with a touch of “diversity studies” throw the order that science made into disorder*, and she also says that a traditional understanding of disability is reductionistic when categorizing (Waldschmidt, Schneider: 2007; Waldschmidt: 2010). In his Foucault-introduction ”The Empty Human Being” Dag Heede says: *The modern power of normalization does not seek to standardize the subjects to zombies without any differences, but more effectively by defining the conditions that define individual differences.* (Heede:2004:103, my translation).

Attending conferences about policy, practice and education in the field of intellectual disability seem to confirm this experience (IASSID 2016). Differences from a medical point of view are very interesting, and research in this area is very important and helpful. I will not deny or question that. But the transformation into implementing research into very practical and concrete practice seems very difficult, and terms as: “The service providers should take care of this” were mentioned several times without any additional comments. I raised the question how the transformation should take place and of course I thought of education. And still I think that there are more to the success of the encounter between the professional and the human being with an intellectual disability than knowledge of the differences. This knowledge helps the professionals if the diagnosis is important – and sometimes the diagnosis really is crucial – and sometimes the encounter should be based on quite other values of more humanistic art.
Youth – challenges in the choice of profession

Another part of my background for this paper is experiences, observations and research related to young students: can we explain why they hesitate to enter the field of working as professionals in the field of intellectual disabilities and how could we possibly make the field of work with intellectual disability more appealing to them?

Students studying social education with the specialization in social and special pedagogy ¹ often prefer to work with children, youngsters and with people in social problems – not choosing people with disabilities in the first place – and the same goes for e.g. students from psychology ². From my own research I have results from other students from other professions related to the work with citizens with different types of problems (Nørgaard:2016).

Looking at the research made by Gro Hilde Ramsdal in Norway it seems that a high self-esteem is a bad competence to possess when you are going to work in the field of disability. If you then – on top of that – also have low expectations to your level of knowledge and low cognitive expectations, it seems as a bad mix for the professional encounter with people with impairments. They – on their hand – experience infringement, violation and humiliation (Ramsdal 2008). The reason could be that a kind of self-protection and a positive self-esteem is not at all that positive factor for social competences and functioning as you often have seen according to Ramsdals work with this area of research.

From an everyday perspective you observe young students struggling: they want to be good students – perhaps without really offering the necessary effort. They want to look good - and sometimes make their body a project, supported and mirrored in their use of social medias³. They want to be accessible 7/24, trying to perform the right profile on social medias. Some of them even develop what is called FOMO – meaning *fear of missing out on social medias* (Andersen 2013). This use of social medias is quite a job, and following Ramsdal it might also imply some narcissistic aspects.

The young students might find it difficult to see “what is in this for me” and “what do I get” – and if this is difficult, they tend to avoid it. Somehow the young students experience a distance between their self and the educational setting. They have to endure it and come to turns with the conditions, even if they feel it as something very strange – and sometimes they will turn away from these conditions as a kind of self-protection (Ziehe:2001, 2006). Their subjectification and their dependency on strong and immediate motivation combined with a way of being online and somehow also creating their self in a mirroring on social medias move their motivation away from a profession where results can seem small and with a staging not being recognized as eye catching and “flashy”. On top of this the professional field also implies work with different kinds of bodies, with different bodily outpourings and with limited verbal communication. Ziehe points out young

---

¹ Social and special education, aimed at pedagogical work with children and young people with special needs and people with physical or mental disabilities or social problems – from: Executive order on bachelor’s degree program in Social Education (not official translation). BEK nr 211 of 06/03/2014

² Comment from Mogens Jensen, Lecturer at Aalborg University

people’s wish to a kind of self-staging and in a way self-promotion. Working professionally with people with intellectual disabilities might not be seen as contributing to this staging. These aspects of the professional work demand an art of attention and awareness that could be experienced as quite demanding and difficult because it implies physical face-to-face presence.

Another Norwegian, philosopher Solveig Magnus Reindal writes about basic problems in the field of special pedagogy in a book on impairment, body and the subject. She means that our traditional understanding of the basic ideas in pedagogy – based on e.g. Kant with values as independence and rationality – implies that we are working with a pedagogy related to a sovereign self where the understanding of e.g. responsibility implies negotiation and some balance in giving and taking. These basic assumptions are part of our attitude towards the other person, Reindal says, and it means that pedagogy easily could result in a kind of object fixation. Reindal plead an awareness to ethics based on presence and she present a “pedagogy for the Other”. In this thinking you stress empathy, responsibility and interdependence, because – and I agree – it is a false dichotomy to say that dependence and autonomy are opposites. Reindal is inspired by the Danish philosophers Kierkegaard and Løgstrup, and also by the French/Lithuanian Emmanuel Lévinas.

In this paper I want to take this inspiration from especially Lévinas a step further. First I briefly present some central ideas and after that I take different ideas into reflections related to the professional meeting between different professionals in the field of pedagogy, social work and similar areas. After that I show how Lévinas ideas could have wider social and political consequences.

**Emmanuel Lévinas – a radical ethicist**

He was born in Lithuania 1906 and studied in France and in Germany. He was greatly inspired from Husserl, Heidegger and Sartre, but he also diverged from their thinking in many ways. Some of his works relate to and are discussed by Merleau-Ponty, Derrida and Lyotard.

My paper includes only some elements of his philosophy. Lévinas lived until 1995 and his works are in many ways radical in its humanity. Lévinas himself said that his philosophy could be expressed in two words: “Apres Vous” – after you, meaning that the “other” always comes first and that the ‘I’ will become a human being when meeting this otherness. This meeting is very important to Lévinas. He uses the word meeting and the same word could be found with the philosopher Martin Buber with whom Lévinas also has discussions.

---

See also: Nørgaard (2016 in press): *Performance og etik i et anerkendelsesperspektiv*, i antologien “Etik i organisationer”, AAU

5 In Norwegian: “Funksjonshemming, kroppen og subjektet. Noen grunnlagsproblemer innenfor specialpedagogikk”.

6 Comment from translator Asbjørn Aarnes p. 202 f. in Lévinas, Emmanuel (1996b): *Den annens humanisme*. Thorleif Dahls Kulturbibliotek, Aschehoug. Aarnes sees it as impressive to be able to contain the philosophy in these two words.
Lévinas means that our modern way of thinking – often very rationalistic and in a tradition from Kant and Hegel – has a tendency to make things the same exactly through our way of thinking and our way of recognizing (Ibid: 148).

For Lévinas presence is a knowing of the skin and the face, meaning knowing that there is a contact, and this presence he calls an ethical, communicative act. You do not have to touch physically, but to Lévinas the words and the language can be understood as presence and not as part of some information chain or circuit (Lévinas: 2012: 292ff).

To understand why this could be important also in a professional context working as a professional with people with disabilities you also have to know that Lévinas works with a special understanding of intentionality. Intentionality often tends to end up in some kind of objectification, but to Lévinas intentionality means almost the opposite: a possibility to form a special synthesis based partly on your senses when meeting/encountering the “other”. He uses the word transitive and the word sensual to describe his “intentionality”, and your understanding of your self is a precondition for this intentionality. It is necessary – and often rather demanding – to possess this understanding. The demands can be seen in an ongoing questioning yourself, and Lévinas thinks this is the way to see the “other” and to continue seeing the “other’s” otherness - and not – as we often do – use yourself as a yardstick and thus making the “other” the same. For Lévinas difference is not subject to comparison Alford: 2002).

Lévinas thinks of phenomenology as “truth- endeavoring- experience”, and he always tries to go to the very root of humanity in his ethics. Understanding the “other” to him is a hermeneutic process, meaning that it is an ongoing process the same way as understanding yourself. And even so there will always be some parts that evades this understanding (Lévinas: 2012: kap 6 og 9).

To me these parts of Lévinas’ work can be seen as an eye-opener.

In many different fields of professionality and scientific research we try to find patterns, to find differences and categories. Doing so we consciously are thinking in terms of “difference” and in terms of “normality”. And when we think this way as professionals encountering people we tend to close down the values represented in Lévinas philosophy. We see the norms and differences first; we tend to objectify the “other” – before we expose him or her to a cure of sameness. You cannot just adapt the “other” into a category, Lévinas says – and thinking so you also will avoid the “totality” that Lévinas always wants to avoid because it does no good to humanity in any way.

Lévinas’ work as an essential inspiration also indicates my general approach. A phenomenological approach means that you have an interest in the lived experience from the actual person. Sometimes this experience seems hidden and it can be difficult to shed light on it or even give words to the experience. Even if the personal experience is very important also the social context and setting matters. Because the human being is part of relations and your humanity is coming through exactly because of these relations. ‘Otherness’ could be an example of this kind of experience, whereas ‘difference’ also can be understood as something measureable and observable. ‘Difference’ can be seen in a rational understanding with certain yardsticks
In the professional field we often are subject to and forced to intentionality. This is often part of the job. But how can we then and considering other of his ideas benefit from Lévinas and his thinking?

**Language, communication and body**

In a modern world with effectiveness and demands on documentation and evidence in the professional social work we mostly think of language and communication as tools for the instrumental and intentional parts of this. To Lévinas communication and language is so much more. It is part of an ethical touch or interruption. The presence and proximity means a kind of disturbance without a claim of content and theme, but just meaning being together as human beings and saying a first word – even if it is not a word (Lévinas: 2012:285ff). To Lévinas the saying is prior to the said and has another value, where we now often think of rhetoric effects as important (Lévinas 1994: 142f). In Lévinas’ later work he stresses the “saying” more than the concept of “face”. Similar to the face as an exposure to the “other” the saying is a gesture telling that I am exposed to you. In the first place saying is neither important as a dialogue or as exchange of information (Alford:2002)

This proximity and intersubjectivity also reflects the value of the body. Proximity is based on seeing, listening and touching according to Lévinas. He says that this situation easily gets affected by prior knowledge and our use of consciousness, and he claims that most phenomenological approaches lack the bodily aspect. Values as love, confidence, and trust are prior to e.g. a caressing gesture and a handshake, but it could be hard to see even in phenomenological analyzes, Lévinas says in “Notes on Merleau-Ponty (Lévinas 2004: 101).

These considerations and thoughts from Lévinas represent ethics, humanity and a respect for the “other”. In an educational and professional context based on intentionality and effectiveness you might ask how to transform these values into an integrated part of a professional identity – and has this to do with learning and learning methods?

**Learning and teaching – what does Lévinas say about this?**

Lévinas has worked on the relation between ethics and teaching (2009). He develops his ideas in a kind of discussion with the methods known as the maieutic from the Greek philosopher Socrates. Lévinas says that the Socratic method only would reveal what was already there and more of the “same”. Lévinas sees the importance in the “other” and his otherness bringing into the situation something else than I could bring in myself. If I am able to question myself and create a space for this otherness from the “other” I create a kind of hospitality – and the “other” would realize that he has more to give and he contains more than he might think. And what is even more important: I also learn more and realize that I contain more than I could have brought into the situation myself (Holst:2011).

The moment for teaching and learning depend on awareness and attention, because as Lévinas says: “Il existe certes un moment où l’une s’ouvre à l’autre – et c’est cette situation que nous appellerons enseignement,” (Lévinas (2009). These moments of ethical disturbance are essential, and
I think we as professionals working with human and social development can learn several things from this:

1) We must be very much attentive and aware in the professional meeting or relation - with e.g. people with intellectual disabilities
2) We should be more aware of the value that these meetings give both sides – the student or the citizen with disabilities learn – but so do the professional
3) Some learning processes cannot be forced and follow a strict time schedule
4) As teachers we should be aware of not just producing sameness but invite to openness and hospitality – keeping the term “ethical disturbance” in mind

In a way Lévinas’ idea of teaching is not a usual teaching situation. You might say it is a situation where the “teacher” accompanies the “other” in a reflecting process where a relation characterized by hospitality will create the necessary openness for a learning process.

**Responsibility - responsiveness**

Lévinas’ work insists on responsibility.

Seeing the face of the “other” implies responsibility – a responsibility that you cannot escape. The mere access to the “other” requires responsibility (Lévinas: 2012). Lévinas does not think of the face as a concrete face, but a face of the human being without cultural imprints or categorizations (Lévinas: 1996a: 20f, 53,148). Seeing this face means in a way that you cannot do this person harm and it also means that not only this face but other- perhaps similar - faces must be dealt with the same way. This means that working professionally with e.g. a person with intellectual disability could be seen as one example as working with persons with similar features. At the same time – and this is crucial for Lévinas – he rejects our tendency to reduce other persons to *sameness*.

The appeal from the face of the “other” means that I am obliged to turn to him and then I am responsible. The responsibility exists from the mere fact that we have a kind of access to the “other”.

The Danish philosopher K.E.Løgstrup has similar reflections and says that you always have a part of the life of the “other” in your hand, and we have a responsibility to tune in on the “other” in your answer because you are responsible for his or her life to succeed or not (Løgstrup: 1956).

This “tuning” and Lévinas would perhaps say a way of thinking and understanding that exceeds what is possible to think and understand and perhaps say, have some similarities with the German philosopher Bernhard Waldenfels’ “responsiveness” (Lévinas: 2012: 257; Waldenfels:1998).

Following this way of thinking means that we must be able to keep an awareness and openness. Because meeting the “other” and listening to the “other” – not only with your ears but with your whole body and mind - in itself implies some of the answers. Some of the answer is already present in the appeal and you cannot plan exactly what to answer or how to react. In a modern world with demands on effectivity and rationality Waldenfels fears that we are developing a kind of awareness
and attention without empathy. What I see from introducing Waldenfels is a stress on the body and our hearing as very important in our maintaining openness to the “other”. You might also say that Waldenfels is less radical in his approach. Lévinas has very high demands on the ‘I’ and its integrity (Lévinas:1994: xxvii; §14). Waldenfels tends to think that Lévinas’ idealism will put a huge burden of responsibility to e.g. a professional.

Lévinas speaks persistently against any kind of totality and also in the meeting he stresses that totality is broken through our openness without any kind of effort. We learn from each other by receiving the “other” and realizing his otherness and right to this otherness that cannot fit any category. In a way the “other” is always “l’absolument nouveau” (the absolute new) (Kemp 1992).

**Otherness – let’s keep it that way**

My motivation for this paper is not to erase differences. It would be very boring if we all were alike and the same. My motivation is to introduce a shift in mindset – and in different areas I think many people and areas of social work could profit from this.

If you have some kind of impairment or disability you could experience attempts to e.g. “help you to walk properly” – “to speak properly” – to be able to take the bus like “normal citizens”. A wish to normalize and compare can seem innocent, but people with impairments sometimes experience this as painful and infringing. Trying to normalize and exercising can be humiliating in itself and a loss of dignity could be the result. These experiences can develop resistance and conflict – or they could result in resignation and apathy. This is not desirable, and my opinion is, that apparently we stress as “modern societies” how much diversity we are containing – but we see the opposite. We dress alike, arrange our lives and houses alike, we exercise and follow the same health tendencies, sexual diversity tend to be quite problematic, ethnicity also – and if you are a bit different you better get a diagnose or should go and see a coach or a doctor.

Is it true as Foucault says that we are frightened by otherness, and that our way of thinking show that also philosophers tend to think in a reductionist way? This affects our way of understanding and seeing disability in general. This is clearly expressed by Waldschmidt quoted earlier. Erving Goffman says: *By definition, of course, we [normals] believe the person with a stigma is not quite human*” and Foucault: ”Madness borrowed its face from the beast” (Carlsson: 2010). Very few philosophers talk about people with different disabilities and often they refer to medical knowledge and very seldom they talk about intellectual disabilities (Carlsson:2010).

If fear as a consequence leads to a reductionist way of thinking it is my opinion that we need a debate on diversity and on normality and deviance. Following press and tendencies at the moment we often see this related to ethnicity and gender, but very seldom related to disabilities. We do not even articulate this group and invisibility seems the worst case of humiliation and infringement.

---

7 Waldenfels, speech AAU 23.10.2013
Gender – could this be another question?
Meeting the “other” in a professional relation based on care, pedagogy, social work or similar areas also has a dimension related to gender. Many professionals in these fields are female, and there seem to be a tendency that it is hard to get a fair recognition for this kind of work. Sometimes this is explained with the term “hybrid”, meaning that you could discuss the foundations of these professions and professionalism, or even doubt that we deal with real professions.

Lévinas seems to think differently about females – or perhaps it has not to do with the gender and the sex per se, but he stresses some advantages in a feminine attitude (Kemp:1992). Lévinas highlights the home as a place for confidentiality and calmness where the ability to be present, aware and attentive means a lot.

In a modern world based on effectiveness and documentation where intentionality and instrumentality count there seem to be a lack of recognition related to the feminine values. This could mean a double infringement to some people with disabilities. They are not recognized themselves and the professionals they depend on experience a lack of recognition, too.

The German philosopher Axel Honneth means that this development is almost a new way of reification that can be seen in many areas of a modern society (Honneth:2005). This development goes hand in hand with governmental requirements on documentation and efficiency establishing a certain kind of transparency related to New Public Management. Thus a shift in mindset is really needed on a micro level among the professionals, but even more on a meso and macro level including organizations and society.

Difficulties in and possible limits using Lévinas’ ideas

“We can reinvent or develop based on what is already known, but deep novelty is created in relation to that which is different from us. This paper maintains that the fear of difference and the marking of the stranger prior to any interaction obstruct a very important source to ‘the new’ (Muhr:2010).

This quote shows one aspect of the difficulties using Lévinas’ thinking. Talking about ‘otherness’ instead of difference might seem awkward. And the term ‘face’ means more than the mere part of the head in front of us. When Muhr in her article “Ethical interruption and the creative process: A reflection on the new” refers to Lévinas, she talks about products and management. Many of her ideas I could easily transfer to the professional meeting with different human beings in a professional setting with e.g. care, pedagogy or teaching. Muhr says:

In the ethical opening to the Other, the stable knowledge of the self is interrupted, thus letting the Other interrupt oneself and thereby allowing a different level of creativity. Interruption fosters creativity, which is not viewed simply as the producer of useful outcomes or the driver of product innovation.

---

In my view this is what is going on in a meeting where the professional is able to see the situation as new all over again. The face of the ‘other’ means that you must be aware of and attentive to the other, at the same time as you as a professional must be able to reduce your awareness of yourself and your own needs.

As a professional you are also working in a certain setting based on economy, rules, legislation etc. his means that a certain amount of intentionality often is part of the routines. This might cause conflicts for the professionals. Because how to cope with an ethical demand of not categorizing, not thinking in intentions and aims and at the same time meet a demand of being a kind of hostage to ‘the other’, as Lévinas also states ( Levinas: 1996a). To keep an eye on the ‘otherness’ at the same time demands an understanding of your own identity – simultaneously on one hand a safe and trustful self-awareness and on the other hand an ability to live in an openness with your own being. Lévinas sees it as raising of your own “I” (ibid. p.18ff).

You might ask if it is possible for a professional with an ongoing and permanent openness and hostage-like situation without losing your professional integrity. Lévinas gives us no direct answer, I think. On the other hand Lévinas fights against any form of totality, and I understand him in a way that reveals some cracks in the very – you might call it idealistic - high demands on the professionals.

One of these cracks could be humor. To bring in humor as a dimension in the different professional meetings is one way of lightning the situation a bit. Humor is exactly a way of being open to the unknown and unexpected, and we also know from international research that humor works best if you have a bit of common ground to share. This of course could be shared experiences, but it could also, following Lévinas, be shared humanity.

Other areas talking about otherness – and a return to difference
You see many disciplines taking an interest in the term ‘otherness’. In ethnography, in cultural psychology and in sociology just to mention a few. Names as Zygmunt Baumann, Michel Foucault and Simone de Beauvoir are all well-known and indicate that they work with gender and sexuality, with ethnicity, with religion and social groups. Also in fictional literature you see patterns and examples of researching ‘otherness’ - and often with a twist of madness or insanity. Often this research contains dichotomies, and following Lévinas I think he hardly would have condoned these dichotomies as a dichotomy in itself contains some categorization.

The word ‘difference’ of course has its eligibility. From a medical point of view it is very fruitful to be able to categorize small differences in different genes and different diseases in order to develop the best treatment and cure. The risk using the word difference is unfortunately to see “sameness” as the desirable goal or norm. And this was what I wanted to avoid – to use oneself or to use arbitrary standards as yardsticks.

My point is that considerations on the term ‘otherness’ is very necessary and that almost all scientific disciplines could profit from Lévinas’ way of thinking ethics into the very close relation
and into an almost ontic level of being and humanity. Thinking HIS way makes us see the human being before anything else as e.g. disability, gender, color etc.

**Literature**


Lévinas, E. (1996 a): *Basic Philosophical Writings*, edited by Peperzak, Critchley and Bernasconi, Indiana University Press, USA


Ziehe, Thomas (2004): ”Øer af intensitet i et hav af rutine” Forlaget politiks revy

Ziehe, Thomas (2006): Indlæringskultur, de unges mentalitetsskifte og relativeringen af deres egenverden, Psykologisk pædagogisk rådgivning. - Årg. 43, no. 3