

# Revisiting Intercultural Competence: Small Culture Formation on the Go through Threads of Experience

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Published in International Journal of Bias, Identity and Diversities in Education Volume 1, Issue 2, July-December 2016 DOI: 10.4018/IJBIDE.2016070101

The original page numbers are marked in red

This paper argues that intercultural competence is not something that needs to be acquired anew but that needs to be recovered from our past experience of small culture formation developed during the process of socialization from birth. This small culture formation is on the go because it is a constant activity in response to everyday engagement with other people. It is activated by drawing threads of experience that can connect with the experiences of others. During cultural travel such threads can be pulled both from home to abroad and back again. This is however not a straightforward process because operating in the other directions are blocks that are created by Self and Other politics and essentialist discourses of culture that can enter into the process at any point, also fueled by our everyday understanding of the world and the global position and politics inherited from national structures. Any process of intercultural competence training needs to help intercultural travelers to recover existing threads and avoid blocks by means of ethnographic disciplines.

Keywords: Competence, Ethnography, Intercultural, Self, Other, Travel

## Introduction

It is perhaps not surprising that much of the recent discussion about intercultural competence has focused on what we need to know and do when approaching a new or unfamiliar cultural domain. This has brought with it a focus on the differences between the familiar and unfamiliar often framed as national or 'big' cultures. However, I wish to redirect the attention to what all of us have been doing when moving through different small cultural domains all through our lives and in what ways we must have been interculturally competent all along, and to how we can then apply this to future encounters. This shift is not however easy because the big culture idea is very hard for us to throw off and constantly gets in the way of what we already have to bring with us.

In this paper I will suggest that a way to focus back on what we bring with us from our existing cultural competence is to look at the small culture formation that we are all involved with from an early age. I shall frame this as 'on the go' to emphasize its everyday, ongoing nature and its potential for being carried with us whenever we go. However, I will also argue that this process continues to be inhibited by prejudicial 'us'-'them' discourses of culture, often associated with big culture concepts. To help make sense of this tension I will introduce a heuristic distinction between block and thread modes of thinking and talking about culture. I will first define what is meant by these concepts and then explore them through examples of common events in everyday life. I will conclude with reflections on how this exploration may then lead to thinking about intercultural competence. I will argue throughout that focusing on threads instead of blocks can be the basis not so much of arriving at intercultural competence but of bringing the competence that we all already possess into play. **[page 1 ends here]**

## Methodology

While this is not an empirical paper in the traditional sense, the use of examples (critical incidents, historical recollections, and reconstructions) follows the broadly ethnographic disciplines of making the familiar strange and allowing meaning to emerge. This is set within the structure of a thick description, where the juxtaposition of instances serves a transformative exploration of meaning. Some of this material is taken from earlier versions of my own work, where bringing it together within the context of this particular thick description allows further meaning to emerge. My use of a first person style, while it may initially appear informal, enables a laying bare of the trajectory of how I construct the thick description. Validity is not therefore in claiming objectivity, but rather in showing the workings of how a subjective image is constructed. This trajectory enables, within the confines of the space allowed, a global interconnection to be made back and forth across the boundaries of time and place which I feel is crucial to understanding the intercultural as a non-essentialist force that brings us together in our diversity. All of this is set within the theoretical framework of small culture formation contextualized within my operational grammar of culture, which itself is the cautious product of previous empirical exploration within a constructivist, social action approach that will be explained as the discussion progresses.

## Small culture formation on the go

Small culture formation can be defined as “the everyday business of engaging with and creating culture” (Holliday, 2013, p. 56); and it relates to the underlying universal processes that we all take part in on an everyday basis forming and re-forming culture as we go. We encounter and learn to position ourselves with small cultures such as family, school, other families, all the groups and institutions that we join or interact with. We carry this intercultural competence with us to apply to new cultural locations.

I can see this in action when watching my grandchildren from a very early age visibly learning how to negotiate the Self and Other of who they and other people are in very complex cultural events such as mealtimes, meeting strangers and encountering the unfamiliar. This is exemplified by a recent event concerning my four-year old granddaughter: We were in a department store together looking for the elevator.

We discussed who to ask for directions and decided on a shop assistant who wasn't serving somebody. He came to the elevator with us and did an exaggerated walk to entertain my granddaughter. The next day, when I was recounting what happened to her father, she said that she didn't like the way the shop assistant walked. I agreed with her that he was rather odd and that I was pleased to get away from him.

I interpret what happened here as my granddaughter assessing the situation she was in. She had worked out the stakes and face issues - when to speak and when not to speak with regard to a stranger, members of her family, and advice she had been given. This was ‘on the go’ because there was not going to be a permanent small cultural relationship with the particular people involved in this event; though the experience would be stored for other events that may take place in the future with similar or different types of people.

I can relate this experience to my own very early memories of going to school, visiting grandparents, parents having guests, all of which stayed with me into more adult events of new jobs, forming relationships, other families, colleagues, shopping, dealing with authority, and travelling abroad. When I read Goffman's (1959) analysis of how we manage ourselves in everyday

life I immediately recognize all these things that I have been doing and experiencing. These are the minutiae of everyday relations, the small things that add up in such a way that the big culture concept can never be exclusive to one type of place. It is however 'culture' in a strong sense because it is to do [page 2 ends here] with negotiating the rules and identities necessary for being with people and getting on with things. When I walk into the café where I am currently writing, I am looking around me for the signs of how to behave - where I can sit, the politics of space with the people at the next table, the politics of role and status in how to have the right relations with the people who serve coffee, learning from the behavior and misbehavior of others, the Self and Other politics of how to be a participant with just enough personal choice to feel good. The café is an example of many things - the tailor, the car mechanic, the grocer, someone else's home, my parents' home, the office, the wedding, and so on.

In contrast to this, the big culture model would have us imagine that only when we come from the same country, religion, race, continent, or whatever grouping is the preoccupation of the time, do we know what to do because we all behave in the same way and have the same values. It would have us imagine that cultural creativity is confined to a particular, perhaps 'individualist', perhaps 'Western culture'. This big culture viewpoint seems however naïve and denies the everyday creativity and uncertainty of humanity everywhere. In reality, it is hard to imagine that all of us, everywhere, are not working out how to be ourselves with groups.

## A destructive self and other politics

However, as part of the small culture process itself we might take on beliefs about Self and Other that frame things so powerfully that we might begin to believe, and certainly to say to others, that our mode of behaving is a particular feature of 'our culture'. The resulting statements that we then make - 'we are individualist', 'you are not', or vice versa would become an important part of how we frame and present ourselves within this Self and Other politics. This would be part of claiming to be exclusive from the Other, and would be an extremely important act of self-identity; but it doesn't mean that the people making the claim really are.

Furthermore, notwithstanding the massive diversity in the details of what we end up doing, this framing, that we are this type of big culture or that, might be out of our personal hands within the larger politics of groups and within how things like nations position and identify themselves for the purpose of rallying their membership to partisan action. This 'big culture' framing can therefore become very real, made real, reified in the minds of the majority. It must also be appreciated that what might in fact be a fiction of national culture is nevertheless very real in the minds of people who project it, and that indeed communities can be defined by how they imagine themselves (Anderson, 2006, p. 6). This does not mean that nations and other large communities do not exist. It is how imaginations about them are spun that is in question.

Negotiating a Self and Other position against such imaginations, because they are imaginations, must therefore be part of our ongoing intercultural competence; but perhaps it needs to be channeled in a different way. Recognizing the importance of a larger cultural politics in the question of intercultural competence may sound to some to be unduly conspiratorial. Much has been written about the ongoing presence of the Othering of cultural realities that have been marginalized by dominant constructions both in the academy and in everyday life (Dervin, 2011; Dervin & Machart, 2015; Hall, 1991; Hannerz, 1991). This is resonant with my recent experience, when giving a seminar in a Southern European location, of being told by students that whenever they travel north they feel treated as culturally deficient. It is therefore highly relevant that a recent project to develop intercultural awareness among Erasmus students travelling across

Europe addresses head-on the presence the deeper prejudicial politics of Self and Other (Beaven & Borghetti, 2015, p. 12).

The wider context within which these factors operate can be seen in my grammar of culture. Figure 1 is adapted from Holliday (2013, p. 2) to focus on what we bring to small culture formation on the go. The arrows show that all the domains influence each other with a loose framework, collecting around small culture formation. The interplay of these domains provides a picture of multiple negotiations with multiple possible outcomes. [page 3 ends here]

Even within a non-essentialist paradigm, which does not attempt to fix the essence of who we are within big cultural profiles, it has to be recognized that national structures (left of the figure) provide us with different upbringings through their particular institutions, such as education and the media, and also many of the multiple cultural resources that we bring to small culture formation. Given that there are also always going to be powerful cultural flows between civilizations, these structures influence the particular cultural practices that have been normalized, and also the big 'C' cultural elements in the arts, that form the environments that we grow up in. These are however mediated by our personal trajectories (top right of the figure), which are the main basis for how we respond as individuals both to the structures and small culture formation. These personal trajectories are thus a personalized filter for whatever national structural resources we employ.

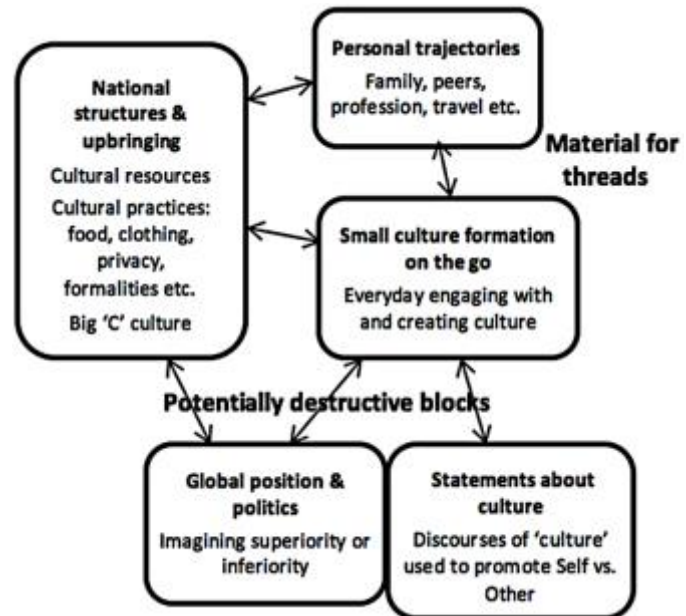


Figure 1: A negotiable grammar of culture

There are however other influences, at the bottom of the figure, that come from the same sources, and that are potentially quite destructive. Global position and politics - the way in which we set ourselves against other societies, people, 'races', civilizations, 'big cultures' and so on - also come from the ways in which we are brought up in our respective national structures, through the historical narratives that often underpin our sense of nationhood, and the ideologies that go with them, fed by our national media, and perhaps by the big 'C' icons of civilization. It is these macro influences that fuel the statements about culture already referred to above.

On the face of it, one might be forgiven for not seeing a connection between the minutiae of small culture formation and global position and politics. It is nevertheless the larger point that I wish to make that there is a global element in any level or size of interaction. I will demonstrate this in the examples later in the paper where the protagonist in a taxi encounter in Britain brings cultural traces from Syria, Egypt and Iran. Also, in this age of explicit globalization, are we not all connected somehow with the global through the media if not in everyday interaction? Indeed, this may not be just a matter of Internet and media resources. My first recollection of being surprised at interaction Figure 1. A negotiable grammar of culture [page 4 ends here] with the global was when travelling in Upper Egypt far away from the capital in the mid 1980s, long before satellite television and the internet, when two villagers came to the car and asked our opinion of

Margaret Thatcher, the British prime minister. Bulawayo's (2013a) novel about Darling, a 10-year-old child in a shanty-town in Zimbabwe, playing 'finding Bin Laden' and 'singing Lady Gaga' with her friends as they roam across their environment without education, extremely critical of their world, might be a subjective account from an author who has never experienced this directly in her own life. However, in her discussion of the novel she makes the point that:

Throw a stone in a crowded place and you will hit a couple of people who come from somewhere, who are removed from their homelands for one reason or another. I wanted the novel to mirror this reality, which is why it eventually crosses the border into the US, where Darling ends up. (Bulawayo, 2013b)

It is for this reason that she is 'inspired by a photograph of this kid sitting on the rubble that was his bulldozed home' resulting from political turmoil. Therefore, even with the ostensibly innocent subject of talking to a taxi driver the choices of how we imagine and deal with people mirror, if not directly invoke, global position and politics.

## Blocks and threads

The dual concept of blocks and threads both helps to explain the destructiveness of global position and politics and statements about culture in Figure 1, and also suggests a way towards a suggestion regarding intercultural competence. The concept first emerged in interviews with newcomer postgraduate students in a British university in which it was found that they shifted between essentialist and non-essentialist statements about their cultural identity when the interviewer explored with them a broader range of cultural possibilities. For example, one of the students made an explicit statement about how everything about Britain was completely different where she came from. She gave the example of girl- and boyfriends holding hands in the street being unacceptable and impossible in her 'culture'. Then, when the interviewer introduced a thread of his own experience of ambivalence about public shows of intimate behavior in Britain and elsewhere, she spoke about ambivalence and variety in her country. Whereas the student's first statement suggested separate, exclusive and binding big cultural blocks, which also blocked movement away from these blocks, the conversation that developed later enabled a productive sharing of threads (Amadasi & Holliday, 2015).

It was therefore revealed that thinking and talking about blocks invokes the harsh boundaries between big cultures that both position us within their boundaries and block any means of carrying identities across those boundaries. It involves asking questions and getting answers that encourage us to think about uncrossable cultural barriers:

How do people in your culture behave at mealtimes?  
The whole family arrives on time and eats together; and show their appreciation of the person who has prepared the meal, who is normally the mother.  
Oh, interesting. That's a bit different to my culture and others I have been to, where the whole thing is less formal and organized. But we can certainly learn from each other in this respect.

There is some sharing here; but it does not really get beyond an 'us'-'them' concept of 'my culture' and 'your culture' (Holliday, 2015); and understanding stops at tolerance - putting up with the foreign that can easily develop into giving up on putting up when circumstances become less amenable. The influence of blocks is in the bottom part of Figure 1, where global position and politics and statements about culture impact on small culture formation. **[page 5 ends here]**

Thinking and talking about threads is very different because it involves what we can pull through from our previous experience to find and engage with the threads of other people's experiences. An example is my retrospective reflection about a real event:

When I find myself talking to two people sitting at the next table in a café in Algiers, I have to work on this by looking for cultural threads that might bring us together. Perhaps they are interested in talking to me, and make the first move, because I look foreign, might have rather clumsily looked for a table and been generally uncertain about how to come and sit down in a café like this one in Algiers. However, instead of looking at them as essentially foreign, which would be easy, I have to focus on how they are café sitters like me. So I talk to them about cafés, about how good it is to sit and relax, about the sorts of work that we have, leisure activities, where we have travelled to, what it is like to be away from home, this part of the city and its history, and so on. (Holliday, 2015)

An important point about this small event is that developing a conversation around threads has to be worked at - searching for openings and possibilities for connections. The influence of threads is in the top part of Figure 1, where small culture formation is liberated by personal cultural trajectories. Against the canvass of 'us'-'them' cultural politics in the bottom part of the figure, I shall argue that thinking and talking about threads constitutes an important action if we are to get anywhere at all in overcoming cultural prejudice.

I have already mentioned areas from where threads may be pulled - our small culture experiences of cafés, the tailor, the car mechanic, the grocer, someone else's home, my parents' home, the office, the wedding. If these are sorts of experiences that we might all share, they are also places from where we can begin conversations that bring us together. In the rest of the paper I will demonstrate this with brief examples of how threads may be formed and made use of, and of the lingering issue of blocks.

### Example 1: Conversation with a taxi driver

My first example is taken from (Holliday, 2013, p. 56) in my discussion there of small culture formation on the go, but will be used to take the discussion further:

I talked to the taxi driver who took me to the station. He had a nearly new large black Mercedes; and we talked about why it was a good car to have because of the inexpensive parts and durability, and also because he could make money by doing high-class chauffeuring and get work that other taxi drivers didn't think of.

The question to ask here is how was I able to talk to him with a fair degree of meaningfulness. I can only speak for myself here; but the tone of his responses also gave me the impression that he also got something out of it. Furthermore, we can never be in total control of what other people make of us. They will always have agendas that are undisclosed and that may have nothing to do with us. However, even within the relatively familiar wider cultural setting of the society that I have been brought up in, this might not be an easy process given potential differences in upbringing, class, age, gender, occupation, religion, political orientation, life trajectory and so on. I therefore need to take care in pulling threads from my experience that I could bring to the incident with the taxi driver. When I speak to the taxi driver, I am essentially myself, but a self that can be in many other settings. It might also mean that there is some sort of core to this self that is rooted in a particular history and place, but that can nevertheless transform itself as it engages with new realities. **[page 6 ends here]**

### Social action, choice and responsibility

I will rationalize these threads within the domains in Figure 1. Elsewhere I have referred to these domains as categories or cultural action (Holliday, 2013, p. 4), with the notion of action taken from Max Weber's social action theory (e.g. 1964) in which the individual has the potential to act in dialogue with the existing fabric of society. This is of course a potential that is dependent on opportunity.

Interaction between a taxi driver and passenger represents a public and fleeting interaction that may nevertheless be within a political domain in which social action is threatened. In cases where there is political oppression and surveillance such an interaction could bring very real anxiety about whom it might be reported to by either party. Such an interaction would however still be marked by choice and action - the choice to take action not to speak and not to take the risk of being reported or betrayed. Even within a supposed liberal, secular, democratic Britain, one can never be sure what the other party endures within an increasing régime of everyday surveillance regarding migration and citizenship status (Nava, 2015).

While I did not imagine a political tension in my particular interaction with the taxi driver in example 1, there was a degree of caution in my approach regarding potential blocks within the global position and politics domain (bottom left of Figure 1). I had an awareness of potential class prejudice related to language. In my initial thoughts about him there was present the statement about culture (bottom right) that 'our mode of speech is different because my class is different to yours'. Whether or not this was an imagined block, if it had led me to mimic my perception of his mode of speech, he may well have been offended; and the block would have increased. It would have been like mimicking the imagined national culture of people from another country as a means of communicating with them. Imagining and mimicking the 'culture' of a foreign Other is bound to reduce them to less than who they are and to be highly patronizing. By far the better strategy is to take people as you find them while trying to put aside any cultural prejudices one has of them.

Choice, action and responsibility are therefore implicit concepts in employing cultural threads that do not invoke blocks.

### Hospitals, mechanics and religion

From the cultural resources domain (top left of Figure 1), I brought the threads of a sufficient interest in cars to ask him in an informed manner about his. However, the biggest resource was from the personal trajectory domain (top right). Perhaps feeding my unnecessary preoccupation with class, I had experience of working as a hospital porter when a student in my late teens that brought me into contact with people from very different backgrounds to my own, whom I certainly at the time labelled as 'working class'. I also had experience of taking my car to mechanics in Iran, Syria and Egypt in my 20s and 30s. The three brothers in Figure 2 looked after my car in Damascus for five years from 1980 to 1985. My Arabic was limited; but we had a shared language around the physical environment of the parts and mechanics of the car. The setting enabled this because the established mechanic-customer small culture of



**Figure 2: Car mechanics**



the time allowed me to spend time watching, pointing and exchanging phrases while they were at work on my car. Much of my rudimentary vocabulary was in turn brought from an earlier part of my trajectory when I had a far better knowledge of language for car parts and mechanics in Persian, that had sufficient cognate resonances with Arabic, also strengthened by my teaching of technical English to Iranian oil company engineers. Although I knew I could never be part of the same world as the three Syrian mechanics, I could still find threads with which to connect with them, certainly as much as with anyone I took my car to in Britain - whose world I could also never be part of.

This experience abroad was significant; but the point I wish to make is that its significance was its place in a longer trajectory that passed backwards and forwards between home and abroad. Indeed, it was the experience of being a hospital porter in Britain that informed that of teaching technical English then learning the Persian vocabulary for car parts in Iran, the working with mechanics in Syria to get my car fixed, and then informed my conversation with the taxi driver in Britain. Moreover, [page 7 ends here] the experience with the taxi driver in Britain now helps me to make more sense of dealing with the mechanics in Syria. I am not sure that working with the mechanics in Syria was stranger than the first experiences of being a hospital porter in Britain. My observation of people dropping into the little mosque in the middle of their daily routine next to the metro station in Cairo in 1985 often resonated strongly with my memory of patients registering with the reception of the hospital where I worked in 1970 and always saying 'C of E' (Church of England) when asked about their religion. Piecing these observations together, the present, and the memory of the past, in turn helped me to make sense of another event, a decade later in 1995. My students from Hong Kong, interviewing people in the streets in Canterbury, were surprised when a significant number said they had no religion. It occurred to me that these may well be the same sorts of people who would claim 'C of E' in a particular circumstance in 1970, and routinely practice religion in Cairo!

This carrying of experience from one event to another is also evident in the case of my granddaughter. There is a final part to the narrative presented at the beginning of this paper: Her mother said that she was pleased that her daughter had taken her advice not to complain about people when they were there, but to wait until later. This had first come up in an earlier event when they had ridden on the top deck of a bus and she had given instruction on how not to talk aloud about the other passengers. Observation of behavior in a stranger location may therefore help one to make sense in a more familiar one. Furthermore, time spent in less familiar locations abroad is not so much engaging with their big cultures as with this continued trajectory. Figure 2. [page 8 ends here]

## Example 2: Esmat and Anthony

Whereas the first example concerns an incident at home, drawing on threads of experience from abroad, the second example concerns two people brought up in very different national structures. This time I focus on the blocks that work behind the scenes to get in the way of the threads that bring us together.

Esmat is a visiting speaker at a conference abroad. She has been collected from her hotel by Anthony, who is taking her to the conference in his car. It's his job to look after her for the day. Imagining his age and noticing some young children things on the back seat, Esmat uses her recent experience with her daughter and grandchildren, and also her young colleagues at home who have young children, to talk to him about childcare, how being a parent impacts on his career and so on. They share their experiences of how difficult it is to manage the work-life balance,



the pressure to do research and to publish in top-rated journals and attend committee meetings and how difficult it is to say 'no' when trying to build one's career. Anthony explains that his wife is a junior executive in a company and frequently needs to travel abroad. He also explains that they are fortunate that, as is common in their culture, her parents are retired and look after their children while they are at work. (Adapted from Holliday, 2015)

On the face of it, this appears to be a successful encounter. Esmat has made the effort to establish a thread from her own experience that enables her to begin to cross boundaries and talk to Anthony about things that they both share; and the engagement in small culture formation in the go is underway. Although Anthony is at home and Esmat abroad, this is not unlike the encounter with the taxi driver in the first example. But, as in that case, there are dangers of blocks to do with the bottom half of Figure 1 that get in the way of this sharing - especially emerging discourses of 'culture' (bottom right). I will use italics to represent the thoughts that Anthony and Esmat have as the event develops. It is important to note that these things are not said, but color emerging prejudice on the part of Esmat. There is not the space here to go equally into Anthony's thoughts. Their various countries of origin are not revealed; but it is clear that Esmat's perception of Anthony is bound up with her imagination of an East Asian big culture.

The first block that gets in the way for Esmat relates to Anthony's reference to his wife's parents looking after their children. The thought that arises in her mind is This is a collectivist culture and therefore children lack an individualist upbringing by which is implied a form of hierarchical groupthink. This is an easy answer, a first response that comes directly from a broader statement about culture, We value autonomy and criticality more than they do. This statement invokes a tacitly and perhaps unconsciously held but still powerful sentiment of superiority over other big cultures that comes from the global position and politics domain (bottom left of Figure 1). Despite Esmat's own criticality and claim to a non-essentialist approach to culture, that has led her to seek threads rather than blocks in the first place, she is exposed to all the media that characterizes especially an East Asian foreign Other as lacking autonomy and criticality.

An example of this is the British media coverage, which Esmat has seen, of the President of China visiting Britain. A journalist with a highly critical reputation finds the box in which were the flags that were provided by the Chinese embassy for demonstrators supporting the President (Walker, 2015), the implication being that the young British Chinese were not autonomous in their decision to demonstrate. If Western European expatriates had made use of their own embassy's banners to demonstrate abroad, one wonders if the same point would be made. It will always be harder for East Asians to establish that they are critical and autonomous than Western Europeans, North Americans and so on.

Anthony may also be falling into an essentialist trap by associating the cultural practice of grandparents looking after children particularly with his own big national culture; but this judgement may be too harsh. It is certainly the case that in some societies more than others, including in East [page 9 ends here] Asia, grandparents commonly take on this role for a range of historical and economic reasons; but this practice should not be used by either Esmat or Anthony to inscribe anyone's character with a profile of cultural deficiency. At the same time, it needs to be recognized that Anthony was perhaps making an important statement about his cultural identity that needs to be respected as such - but as a strategic statement about culture rather than as a description of his actual culture.

A second block comes from Esmat's desire, despite her prejudice, to be more understanding by accepting that This is their way of doing things so we should respect whatever they do. She feels secure with this way of making sense of Anthony because it is 'the best way' to respect his

probable belief that This is the way we are; this is how we do things. This cultural relativist discourse has the appearance of respect and tolerance, which might be fine if the stakes of the engagement are not high and Esmat is going to go away and move on. On the other hand, there is something deeply patronizing if she accepts this viewpoint as a longer-term view of Anthony and where he comes from. The implication is that We can't expect them to value autonomy and critical thinking like we do that implies a deficiency regarding what they are able to do and not do.

This in turn moves into what I have named a West as steward discourse of culture that maintains that we must either protect 'their' values or educate 'them' to transform themselves (Holliday, 2013, p. 109). Here I follow a number of critical sociologists (e.g. Delanty, Wodak, & Jones, 2008; Zimmerman, 2006) who make it clear that a veneer of well-wishing within the West hides a powerful patronizing agenda of looking after and improving the world as though through an educational project. Hence, while Esmat starts out with a desire to be accommodating, the result is an ever-deeper spiral of Othering.

A further possibility is that Anthony himself might buy into the cultural relativist discourse that Esmat is constructing for him, thus, inadvertently, buying into the West as steward discourse by identifying himself within the protected cultural domain that is in need of Western support.

### Staying longer

Let us now imagine that Esmat is going to invest more time with Anthony as a colleague by getting a job in his university. To be with Anthony and his colleagues on the best terms, Esmat therefore has to embark on some serious research to find out what is going on. This is the sort of research we all carry out every day to work out how to get through and be successful in what we do.

Being 'successful' here involves a number of things. Esmat has to find a way to protect her integrity. She has to be herself while not breaking the relationship through radical opposition to what she considers her new society's very different values to be. If the cultural relativist and West as steward discourses are employed, resulting in deeply patronizing attitude, they are not going to lead to productive accommodation on either side. This is not to say that even long-term relationships cannot be formed. People can live and work abroad, or with other people's families, or in a wide range of small culture circumstances, for many years and never get past destructive 'us'-'them' preoccupations with what is wrong with and how they must put up with this 'other culture' on a daily basis. It needs to be recognized here that neither Esmat nor Anthony are likely to be aware of the discourses that underpin how they think about each other. A particular strength of the embeddedness of the West as steward discourse is that it is fed by Esmat's strong self-image of 'criticality' - a criticality though that is occupied by being directed towards issues such as human rights rather than how she deeply imagines that Anthony belongs to a cultural deficiency. It is the hardest thing for people who base their identity on being critical to realize that there are domains that they are distinctly not being critical about.

At the same time, the people who consider this other society their home will often see through the people who patronize and colonize them "viscerally ... at times articulated in discourse, but more often remaining un-articulated, forming a backdrop of knowledge that is constitutive of the subject's past and present" (Jabri, 2013, p. 5). There can be a long term and deeply sustained 'putting up with' on both sides. **[page 10 ends here]**

### A critical engagement with the threads of others

Finding threads is important; but if this sustained state of 'putting up with' is to be avoided, Esmat must also learn not to be complacent about the threads that she is projecting and be wary of the hidden blocks that they may settle into because of the default global position and politics that

surrounds them both. She has already worked to find threads that can connect her with Anthony; but she also needs to be open to and search for threads from the experiences that she meets. To do this she needs to open her mind to consider wider possibilities - that there could be complexities that she has not thought of behind whether or not there is any connection between how we bring up our children and the development of autonomy and criticality. To do this she must work hard not to see Anthony's society as a monolithic and suspect big culture but as people just like 'us', but with different histories, geographies and structures, struggling to work things out just like 'we' do.

Nevertheless, there will still be the possibility that Esmat is right in some of her perceptions. It is not inconceivable that grandparents playing a major role bringing up children might have some sort of detrimental effect. Here, I cite another, critical cosmopolitan, discourse of culture, which I feel drives the non-essentialist paradigm (Beck & Sznaider, 2006; Delanty, 2006). On the basis of recognizing the fluidity, resilience and creativity of cultural realities that have been marginalized by dominant Western discourses, it promotes the possibility of innovate travel across cultural boundaries through a process of what I have called bottom-up globalisation through which the margins can take center stage. Implicit in this is the notion of cultural contestation, which means that just because a social practice is found in a particular cultural environment does not mean that it should be accepted as unchangeable. However, the very strong point must be made that such judgements must not be on the back of Othering entire populations of big cultures.

### Applying ethnographic disciplines

It becomes clear that intercultural competence is by no means an easy process. It involves working hard to find cultural threads both from one's own existing experience of small culture formation on the go and in the unfamiliar cultural domain that one might approach, navigating around blocks that are deeply embedded in the discourses, histories, global politics and structures that we are brought up with, and being able to critique and perhaps contest the practices that we find without doing this from a basis big culture chauvinism. There is however a remarkable similarity between this process and carrying out qualitative ethnographic research within a postmodern, constructivist paradigm. Ethnography applied to intercultural awareness is not a new concept (Byram, 2008, p. 115). The emphasis that I would like to bring to this is the postmodern realization that the researcher is an active, intervening, co-constructing participant in the research setting (Blackman & Commane, 2014; Holliday, 2016).

A crucial first discipline is to search out and recognize the impact of one's own global position and politics. This will require Esmat to acknowledge her preoccupation with human rights in her imagination of an East Asian big culture and to anticipate its influence on how she will perceive Anthony. An example of an activity to help students studying across Europe to appreciate this politics is looking at "essentialising" narratives which reduce their subject to a "single story"... including those of their own and other communities' (Beaven & Borghetti, 2015, p. 13). A discipline that relates directly to pulling threads from one's existing experience is to explore how one's autobiography influences one's research agenda. A resource that Esmat can bring to this is her own experience, which we have all had, of being misunderstood by others, of being a different person to what others think we are. A good example of this is Yamchi's (2015) study of how female Emirati students bring criticality to writing in English that their teachers do not recognize. The title of the work includes the phrase, 'I am not what you think I am'; and Yamchi explains how her own recollection of being culturally misunderstood provides her with a way into recognize what they have to say.

A third discipline is seeking thick description - a method of submitting oneself to diverse instances of observed behavior that interconnect in such a way that an unexpected picture is formed. I have already referred to this as guiding my own methodology in this paper. Geertz (1993, p. 6) demonstrates [page 11 ends here] this with Ryle's account of two boys either winking or twitching in an open space. The full sense of what is going on - that the winking boy is imitating the twitching boy - by exploring what is going on among a group of boys standing at some distance from them, who provide the audience for the social act of winking. This way of looking around would help Esmat perhaps to see something that might counter her essentialist response to the practice of children being looked after by their grandparents.

## Complex and simple

In this paper I have tried to demonstrate that we are all naturally interculturally competent from an early age and we engage with the culturally strange throughout our lives. This means that intercultural competence is not something to be learned as a new domain when we encounter the culturally strange, but something to be recovered from our experience of everyday life. The two examples I have presented show that it involves global politics and tacit discourses; it involves choice, action and responsibility; it involves sense-making that relates forwards and back between home and abroad across whole trajectories of experience; it requires both pulling threads from the past and searching for unexpected threads in the present. Reference to ethnographic disciplines furthermore invokes the image of a highly sophisticated researcher employing difficult reflexivity in which Self and Other relations need to be deeply interrogated. It seems that these difficult skills enable us to be understood by others who have not experienced what we have experienced; and, conversely, they put us in a position to understand them. At the same time, knowing that others will have experienced what we might or might not have experienced will enhance a sense of respect and sharing, hesitation and caution. We have to appreciate that communication might not be easy and that things have to be worked out on a daily basis.

My conclusion is aided by the notion of simplicity (Dervin & Byrd Clark, 2014, p. 238, citing Berthoz). While what I have described in this paper may seem impossibly complex, simplicity suggests that at a simpler level it is also what all of us have to do every day in order to get on with our lives - but made to work against essentialism and prejudice by means of a reflexive engagement with the best part of who we are. This also relates to the reflexive simplicity of what Schutz (1964) characterizes as the natural research that a 'stranger' needs to engage in when approaching a social group that she wishes to join or to deal with. On one level, intercultural awareness or training can focus on recovering what we bring with us to find threads and avoid blocks. On another level though, it requires a profound and critical education in sociology and cultural studies. [page 12 ends here]

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