The Yin-Yang Relationship Between Essentialist and Non-essentialist Discourses Related to the Participation of Children of Migrants, and Its Implication for How to Research

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There is a complex relationship between the essentialist and non-essentialist discourses that respectively fail to and succeed in recognising the potential for participation which the children of migrants bring with them into new cultural settings. These competing discourses curl around each other within the structures of educational settings and within all the people involved, including the children themselves. A yin-yang framework helps us to see the nature of this entwined relationship and the hybridity which is the key to untangling it. It helps researchers to understand that getting to the bottom of what is going on is not straightforward and requires that they reassess who they are and how they should proceed. Sometimes it takes unusual and unexpected circumstances, such as those brought about by the emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic to shake their thinking-as-usual and to see the unexpected.

Keywords: discourses of culture; yin-yang; migrant children; agency; participation; COVID-19

Introduction

This paper looks at how the abilities of children of migrants to participate in whatever cultural setting they find themselves becomes unrecognised and driven into private, invisible sites by essentialist discourses of the intercultural. We will look first

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at the competing discourses that act upon this understanding. While this is not an empirical paper, we will then make use of an example of fieldwork carried out within the CHILD-UP project that demonstrates how unrecognised behaviours can come into view. Throughout, we will consider the Chinese philosophical concept of yin and yang as a means for making theoretical sense, and develop this towards the end of the paper to suggest a methodological way forward to recognise, accommodate and legitimise the possibility of competing discourses in revealing the hidden.

A major premise of our discussion is that essentialist discourses are difficult to recognise and deal with because they exists alongside and curl around the non-essentialist discourses that we are trying to establish. This curling around each other of competing discourses is represented in our paper through a yin-yang relationship based on ancient Taoist philosophy that recognises the everyday complexity and diversity of things. This curling around is particularly evident in educational institutions where the structures that are necessary for organised learning are also the structures that can exclude the potentials for participation that migrant children bring with them. Moreover, the children themselves, who wish to participate according to the structures of education that they find, might themselves, in doing do, push into private sites forms of participation that they bring with them. The yin-yang curling around thus helps us to understand a common reality in which competing essentialist and non-essentialist can and do exist within the same people and places at the same time, the yin-yang relationships also represent the inherent and indeed hybridity of all cultural settings, within which hybrid integration becomes meaningful.

To try to understand this better, we make use of events observed during the COVID-19 pandemic. While this has had devastating effects on our abilities to carry out our work as planned within the CHILD-UP project, it has driven us to take unusual action in the form of online focus groups which changed our researcher thinking-as-usual and enabled us to see forms of participation by the children that we were not able to see before.

The yin-yang understanding also has impact on how we can carry out our research. The normal procedures of quantitative data collection may be confounded by the fact that the categories of behaviour that were first thought of might not actually be there. This is because the structures that both enable and inhibit the participation we are looking for may also curl around each other in different ways in different places. We therefore recommend that it is important to have a more ethnographic good look around to see what is going on in particular settings before establishing what to count in the quantitative phase.

First we will look at evidence in the literature for essentialist and non-essentialist discourses that deny or support the notion of hybrid integration in student participation, and then demonstrate how the relations between these discourses act out in the particular case of the online focus group carried out during the COVID-19 lockdown. We will finally discuss the implications for research methods.

Researching the intercultural and discourses of culture

In trying to make sense of the difficulties we can encounter with complex data when researching the intercultural, it is perhaps useful to think of two conflicting types of discourses of culture. By discourses here we mean a ways of thinking about and constructing the world through language and images. The two types of discourses are described in Table 1.

Table 1

Established essentialist discourses of culture	De-centred hybridity discourses of culture
Precisely defining the large national or civilisational culture	Messy and creative
'Intercultural communication'	Personal trajectories and agency
Across bounded large culture boundaries	Interculturality = self in others and others in self
Measurable 'intercultural competence'	Multiple culture flows and innovation
Adopting 'native' language and culture	Bringing diverse linguacultures
Useful for educational institutions	'We are all hybrid'
Teaching difference and how to adopt	Small culture formation on the go
Specialist knowledge:	Do not fit easily into educational structures
'I don't have expertise in intercultural communication or multicultural issues'	Why we prefer facilitation instead of teaching
	In all of us – but unrecognised
	Driven to 'private sites of participation'

The essentialist discourses on the left of the table are 'established' in the sense that they are most often voiced and are encouraged by how nation states have, in our upbringing, education and media, commonly been framed as essentially different to each other with their own separate languages and cultures. While there is much discussion regarding the nature of discourses and how they underpin, distort, and generally help us understand the ideological nature of the social world (Fairclough 2006, 2013), it is sufficient to say here that this viewpoint has been criticised as the artificial result of how nation states have been politically constructed, resulting in methodological nationalism (e.g. Beck and Sznaider 2006). These established discourses are also convenient for academic structures because they lend themselves to measurement and a body of knowledge or subject matter than can be 'mastered' as a specialism and taught. Collins (2018) describes the politics of how this happens in the neoliberal university. We will argue later that this is also the case in schools. This is because the established discourses of intercultural communication are full of details of cultural difference which, though mostly false, can be described and measured as teachable technical content – such as 'acculturation', 'adoption', 'integration' and 'intercultural competence' (Kumaravadivelu 2007: 68; Shuter 2008: 38). This also creates a sense of specialism that makes some educators and other involved parties feel

that they do not have the expertise to fully understand or 'teach' it. There is also the hidden racism implicit in the way in which these technical constructs imply a precise 'us'-'them' learning of how to be in an otherwise inaccessible 'target' culture based on ethnic difference and of 'native' superiority (Hervik 2013). Within these discourses, migrants therefore are falsely constructed as needing to be taught to adapt to and integrate with what are constructed as 'native' values and behaviour.

The de-centred discourses on the right of the table, characterised as hybrid, suffer from being much harder to pin down. This is especially the case when we deal with quantitative data, as the illusion that such data is always objective might prefer the consolidation of the technical concepts in the established discourses instead of encouraging the application of a de-centred approach. Indeed, claiming hybridity is instead to resist definition and to resist using quantitative results as the grounds for simplistically confirming or invalidating complex social dynamics.

However, a lot of hybridity is to do with what we all do every day in the complicated small culture formation on the go of making sense of who we all are with others – as an alternative to national identities (Hall 1996: 619), as the nature of culture *per se* (Bhabha 1994: 56), as the nature of the cosmopolitan (Delanty 2006: 33), and as an 'upsurge of new forms of life' (Guilherme 2002: 126). This very special 'every day' is intercultural in that we are always struggling to position ourselves and our narratives of life with different groups, friends, professions, leisure, politics and so on, all with their particular and different cultural features.

The difficulty that migrants have is not with their intercultural abilities, which they too have been practicing all their lives, but instead with lack of familiarity with foreign structures and systems within which they lack status and capital. They already know how structures and systems work per se, because they too exist in different forms within all societies; but the task is made harder by the prejudices with which migrants are received. Some of these prejudices come from the left side of the table, which can give the false impression that people from other places bring nothing of value with them and have to learn everything 'here'. Perhaps it is also the notion of hybridity as the norm for all of us that makes this de-centred discourse of culture indigestible in educational institutions because it implies that there are already aspects of being migrants in all of us, and aspects of us as expert intercultural actors in all of them.

If these hybrid, messy, creative and boundary-dissolving abilities are not accepted by educational institutions, naturally creative and agentive migrants are driven to practise them in private sites away from the scrutiny of the teacher and the institution. While they represent threads that bring us all together, they are also very difficult to find because of their de-centred, third space nature (Holliday and Amadasi 2020).

Private sites of participation

A good example of 'private sites' is described by Canagarajah (1999: 88–90) in his book with the telling title, *Resisting linguistic imperialism*. He describes Sri Lankan secondary school children in a classroom setting with an American English language textbook. In it, two bank robbers are escaping in a car. The children enjoy the story but feel that they are more than this narrow, 'American', implicitly 'native' example of English. They therefore write their own version of the story, employing their own rich cultural narratives, in speech bubbles and other scribbles in the margins. In doing this, they *appropriate* the language, in their own super-intelligent image, by turning the robbers in the original story into two escaping lovers in a Tamil film.

Their teachers have no idea that this is happening; and the children's linguistic ability in the scribbled marginalia, which is of a far higher level than what is displayed in classroom responses and writing exercises, is never seen. This is because the participation that they are enacting privately does not fit into the formal objectives of the syllabus.

We refer to what they are doing as private sites of participation. While the children are not participating in the lesson as the teacher had planned, they *are* participating because they are responding to the story in the textbook, which is part of the syllabus. However, they are doing this in their own way on their own terms. It is private because their teacher does not see it. Or, if they do see it, they might dismiss it as misbehaving.

Another example is minority ethnic children in an inner city London school in Britain 'playing' with language by imitating the accents of children from other linguistic groups while apparently 'misbehaving' in class. Again, this 'play' shows a higher linguistic ability than in formal classroom tasks (Rampton 2007). It however remains unnoticed and 'private', out of site of the teacher, because, like the marginalia of the Sri Lankan children, it is not considered to be part of the formal syllabus.

In this second example, it might be less clear that the children are participating, in the sense of taking part in the lesson, because they might be doing what they would do anyway whether in the classroom, in the playground, in the street, or wherever they are together with their friends. However, the key for what would make meaningful participation is there. They are doing what *should* be included in the teacher's plan.

This lack of recognition of what children are able to do out of sight of their teachers is why there need to be very particular conditions to enable such agentive creative expression to become visible in educational settings – to bring their hitherto unrecognised participation, or behaviour that should be recognised as participation into mainstream of the educational process. An example of such conditions for legitimising student participation is using photographs to engage with the cultural pasts of children of migrants (Baraldi and Iervese 2017).

Applying a de-centred hybridity discourse serves to acknowledge that commonly applied definitions within the educational institution, such as misbehaving, 'good' **41**

student, 'proper' behaviour or 'normal' development, which exclude forms of participation which are already there but made invisible, are formulated and reproduced within the educational institution itself through discourses that affect the child's identity construction and reputation as suggested by MacLure et al (2012). It is these commonly applied definitions that drive evidence of children's agency into 'private sites' and therefore away from the formal gaze of the teacher and the institution. The de-centred hybridity discourse instead recognises multiple forms of participation and the agency that comes with it so that it no longer needs to be private, and brings it into the formal gaze.

Opposing discourses of culture and childhood

Here we will look at essentialist versus non-essentialist literatures regarding children's migration and how the former serve to build barriers or blocks to recognising wider forms of participation that might be inherent in the cultural behaviour that the children bring with them.

Essentialist discourses

When it comes to the specific topic of children experiencing migration, there are a number of discourses within the essentialist literature and different ways through which this literature promotes essentialism. A first group of these works looks at international or transnational movements of children as a risk and danger for their sense of belonging, identity formation (Fail et al. 2004) and culture identity (Hoersting and Jenkins 2011). In these works, the risk lived by children is not mentioned in terms of all the common risks that every person migrating might experience. Instead, it is linked to the specific condition of displacement. This is framed in these studies as the how the pressures of the bounded large, national or civilisational, cultures, as places, in which the children arrive affect them. Therefore, what prevails is an understanding of the child as a not fully formed and still 'in-becoming' person (Sirota 2012) who, because of this, has an innate need for fixed and bounded spaces. This view of the child, associated with essentialist concepts of identity and culture, strictly interprets the issue of mobility through a lens of detachment which prevents children with migration backgrounds from any possibility of participation in the education of the so-labelled 'host' large culture.

This essentialist association between childhood and the need for domestic and fixed environments, however, is also, and above all, built on a particular understanding of the process of identity-making, which falsely conceives and constructs children's mobility as traumatic and dangerous, and children as passive recipients of culture and identity, thus denying the inherent abilities to participate that they bring with them.

According to Amadasi (2014, 2020), behind the perspective presented in this essentialist literature, we can identify three established essentialist discourses. One concerns children's development (Prout and James 1997) which distorts the everyday understanding of children as fully formed persons in their presence in any cultural environment. This has been named and critiqued as 'the developmental discourse' (Aitken et al. 2007; Kjørholt 2007). A second is the 'national discourse', recognised and critiqued by Christensen et al. (2000). This looks at identity as an evolutionist element of the individual, and at identity formation as a process that needs to be confined to stable localities when it involves children. Finally, a 'culturalist discourse' lies in a reified and essentialised idea of fixed and bounded large culture which has now been critiqued by a number of writers in the area of intercultural studies (e.g. Dervin 2011; Holliday 2011; Piller 2011), and which denies children the possibility of being active participants in social processes that transcend these imagined boundaries.

While it is relatively easy to understand how the above works are essentialist in the way in which they attempt to confine migrant children within large culture profiles, there is a second body of literature whose essentialism is harder to see. It presents what appears to be a positive, non-essentialist view of migrant children (e.g. Moore and Barker 2012: 555). It frames children's mobility as a positive experience in that it should teach them the ability to shift between different bounded large cultures and attain new cultural identities. Holliday (2011: 7) refers to such works, which acknowledge that people can move beyond the stereotypes that otherwise define them, yet nevertheless still seek to confine them within one bounded large culture or another, as neo-essentialist. He suggests that this viewpoint gives rise to an essentialist definition of hybridity as a mixed state of being in-between large cultures (2018: 138). This is far from the non-essentialist meaning, as in 'hybrid integration', which relates to a normal state of being many things that relates to all of us at all times.

The hypothesis supported by this second group of neo-essentialist studies (e.g. Lyttle et al. 2011; Moore and Barker 2012) attempts to turn the experience of travel lived at a young age, which might in actuality be the result of factors beyond the children's control, as an educational project to train them in intercultural competence. At the core of this competence is an interpersonal sensitivity that enables them to perceive and respond appropriately to the surrounding social environment (Lyttle et al. 2011: 688, citing Bernier). This discourse therefore turns an accident of life into a designed programme of educational or even cultural improvement. It is essentialist and Othering in that it presumes that such competence can only be gained by travel to the West. It denies the intercultural competence that the children will naturally have acquired, in the small culture sense, throughout their childhood and upbringing as a natural and agentive, rather than a taught, process. Once again, it denies the possibility that they might have brought with them the potential to participate in the new educational system.

This thinking gives rise to a more essentialist concept of interculturality which implies looking from one bounded large culture to another through a lens of tolerance,

as critiqued by Holliday (2018: 45). This implies that the children need constantly to compare the values they bring with them with the new ones they find. This brings a positivist semantic value which presents only in essentialist understandings of the movement between different bounded large cultures and contexts. An example of this is the idea of 'cultural fluency' (Lyttle et al. 2011: 686) which, implies a new bounded large culture which has to be learnt, like a new language, through the intercultural exposure or immersion which travel enables.

Although these essentialist studies do not refer explicitly to migrant children but more generally to children who have a 'culturally mobile upbringing', both the essentialist and neo-essentialist interpretations, look at cultural identity as reified and shaped by external, culturally bounded forces. In a discussion around the conflict between established essentialist and de-centred hybridity discourses of culture, it needs to be emphasised how the former represent children as passive recipients of bounded large cultures and identities, thus reproducing an established essentialist discourse that denies children's personal agency (Amadasi and Iervese 2018) and their ability for active participation in new social processes.

Non-essentialist discourses

In contrast to the essentialist and neo-essentialist discourses, a de-centred hybridity discourse recognises the possibility for children to actively contribute to small culture formation on the go in the same way as adults. It redefines intercultural competence as something that is naturally learned and brought from early childhood on an everyday basis (Holliday 2016). It redefines interculturality as a far messier and indeed political process in which we all engage in a hybrid finding of Self in Other and vice versa, as defined by Dervin (2016). The educational process is therefore not so much to teach these concepts as new sets of skills, but to help children to recover their existing experience of them by means of interventions that help put aside the essentialist structures that have driven them into 'private sites', as has been the aim of the CHILD-UP project (see Baraldi in this collection).

What the pandemic shows us about children's participation and how to research it

In this section we will consider the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic not just in terms of its undoubted damage to the education of migrant children, but of what it has revealed about the nature of their experience. It has ironically brought into greater focus the difference between essentialist and non-essentialist discourses. It shows not only the high degree of vulnerability of the non-essentialist discourse, and how the hybrid potential for participation that the children bring with them can so easily be driven back into private sites.

In the last ten months, due to the pandemic outbreak, there were fears concerning the role of children in spreading the virus through social gathering, but also through their presence in schools and use of public transports. This fear systematically contributed to deleting attention to their participation in education from public debates (Baraldi and Amadasi 2021). By talking about participation here we refer to a form of children's expression of agency (Moosa-Mitha 2005: 380) and choice (Baraldi 2013).

Furthermore, regarding the challenges experienced by children with migration backgrounds, this detachment from educational institutions has raised some concerns about their opportunities to have access to the technology needed to attend lessons – once again confining all attention to their ability to fulfil established educational requirements and ignoring their need for social participation. While this invisibility of participation in institutions relates to all children, it is particularly problematic for migrant children because, with the essentialist discourse, they were not thought to have it in the first place.

As researchers, we therefore needed to find a way to get back to positions where we could listen to children's thoughts and experiences in these tough times and to reconnect with a de-centred hybridity discourse. As with the examples above from Sri Lankan and British inner city London schools, it is very often the unexpected that is noticed between the lines of research events that shakes of the thinking-as-usual in research and brings the new understanding that we need to move forward. We take this idea of interrogating the thinking-as-usual from George Simmel (1908/1950).

This opportunity came with the few focus groups that the Italian team had the chance to conduct in May 2020, while Italian schools were still closed and the first lockdown had just ended. Full details of this intervention can be found in the CHILD-UP report on qualitative research with children in school (forthcoming). Here it is sufficient to report that focus groups were conducted online with the help of some teachers who grabbed the opportunity offered by the event to try to draw attention to their students' voice after months of isolation and change. These focus groups were carried out via Google Meet, with every child, as well as the teachers and the researcher, connected from their homes. The meetings were audio recorded and all the consent forms for parents, necessary to involve children in the research, were sent and gathered via email with the precious help of teachers. The unusual efforts that had to be taken to enable this to happen somehow enabled the coming into visibility of what might so easily have remained private and invisible in more 'normal' activities.

The focus groups were events that required the researchers to radically rethink their established way of doing field research. Doubts related to the will of the students to speak to someone they met for the first time online certainly affected this new approach. Moreover, what made the situation more uncertain was that most of the differences the researchers had to face in this at-distance situation, more than ever before, could not be foreseen. The new media through which the focus groups were carried out made it clear how the unexpected was the only certainty of the meetings. **45**

An example of this was represented by the chat function of the platform where the meetings took place.

During the meetings, the chat was appropriated and transformed by the students as the equivalent of the small informal background chats that they had previously usually exchanged while in class to escape from the adult's control (rather like the out-of-sight scribblings and 'misbehaviour of the children in Canagarajah's and Rampton's studies cited above). This meant that what before had been hidden and 'private' participation was unavoidably visible on the screen
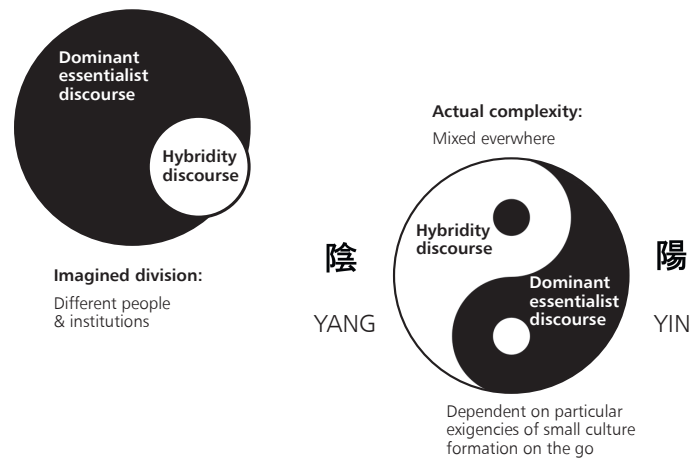
The chat therefore became something that could not be ignored by the researcher if they wanted to create a connection with the students by activating a form of communication which was based on active listening and which gave value to each contribution and piece of participation. This was especially relevant in a situation where the participants and the researchers could not rely on looking at each other when trying to infer, explore and know the expectations of the other through the reciprocity of a gaze or a smile, or even, by looking away.

However boys and girls involved in these focus groups participated with enthusiasm, showing how, after three months of online meetings they were better experts than the researcher. This is resonant with research carried out by Norton (2012) in which children in rural settings in Uganda who, when given access to new technologies, were able to show creativity and agency that had not before been institutionally recognised, and also with the well-documented impact of new digital technologies in making visible previously hidden agency and creativity among school children in Egypt and Hong Kong (Lin and Cheung 2014; Warschauer 2003, 2006, 2012). What is important here is the recognition of children's capacity to choose in a system of possibilities and constraints. If this is not recognised, they are not seen as active participants, or indeed as social actors. Agency, therefore, has to do with interaction, and, following Valentine (2011: 356), is not conceived of here as a personal ability.

Not what we might think

It is easy to think that the de-centred hybridity discourse is difficult to find because it is surrounded and beleaguered by the domination of established essentialist discourse. This interpretation is shown in Figure 1. This picture would indicate that the participation of the migrant children (the hybridity discourse) is simply hidden in private sites by the dominant essentialist discourse until we can find it by putting aside the dominant discourse.

However, this is far too simple. Duan (2007) found a different sort of relationship. His research critiqued the dominant essentialist discourse in China and everywhere else that 'Chinese school children only think about examinations'. And, indeed, he found in their personal diaries, a de-centred hybridity discourse (though not his term) that

Dominant essentialist discourse

Hybridity discourse

Imagined division:
Different people & institutions

Actual complexity:
Mixed everwhere

陰 YANG

Hybridity discourse

Dominant essentialist discourse

陽 YIN

Dependent on particular exigencies of small culture formation on the go

'although we work hard for our exams, we are also desperate for personal time away from examinations' and that 'nobody understands who we really are'.

However, when Duan interviewed the *very same* school children 'more formally', six months later, they overwhelmingly told him the *opposite* of what they had said before – that 'we are only interested in exams', thus confirming the dominant essentialist discourse. This more complex relationship indicates that the children, at different times, for different reasons, or indeed at the same time, themselves produce conflicting narratives. These could feed both essentialist and non-essentialist discourses in the sense that some of their choices might serve to make their participation less visible.

In the distance learning setting of the online focus groups, for example, such conflicting narratives were visible where students switched between them on the basis of their needs. On some occasions, some students admitted to craving for a return to the routine of being physically present in school at the same time as admitting how distance learning allowed them to better manage their time, having more possibility to wake up just before the beginning of lessons, or pretending to have difficulties with their internet connection when they were not interested in a lecture or they wanted to skip a test. Interestingly, what was a common narrative among adults before the pandemic – the need for young people to not spend too much of their time looking at a computer – suddenly became the narratives used by students to reclaim their free time during lockdown (Baraldi and Amadasi 2021).

This also resonates with an important observation made by Holliday and Amadasi (2020: 42) that participation is not only evident in how children perform educational events designed for that purpose, but also in resisting taking part in such events. This is also shown by Hutchby (2002) in a case study in which a six-year-old child adopts a strong resistance during a counselling talk by answering 'I don't know' to all the counsellor's questions. Children might resist showing how they can participate in such events, and thus showing their agency, because they do not think that they are appropriate places for such behaviour.

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It is not our intention to give the impression that educational structures, because they often do not recognise how children can participate, should be removed or reduced. Indeed, the examples in this section show that it is in relation to the structures that children can show their agency. Instead, we want to suggest that structures should be altered so that they can recognise children's agency, and accommodate and promote their participation.

All the discourses can operate at the same time

Seeing that the two completing discourses could exist within the same person at different times led Duan think again. He too was confronted by an unexpected research problem that caused him to interrogate the thinking-as-usual of how research is done. He eventually found the Taoist concept of yin and yang useful. Whilst this is a huge philosophical and spiritual discussion which there is no space to describe here Duan gives us a glimpse:

> This was my adaptation of a core Taoist concept held by Zhuangzi, called zuo wang, literally meaning 'sitting in forgetfulness', through which we might attain a state of absolute freedom, in which we forgot the distinctions between others and the self, and equate life and death, so all things become one'. (2007: 71)

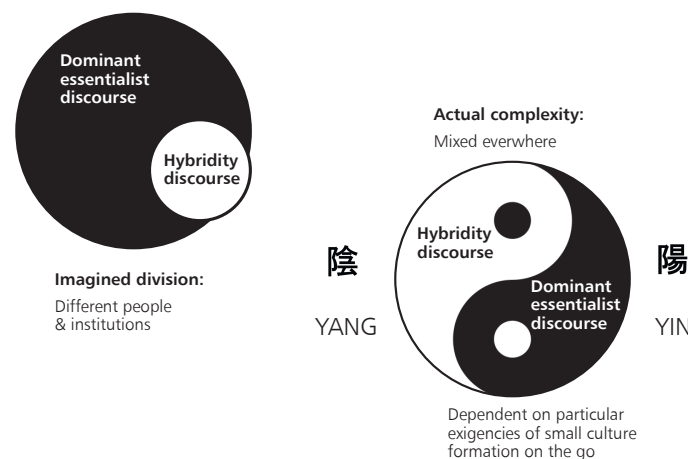From this he referred to his analysis as 'sitting on my data':

> What I meant by 'sitting on my data' was that if we could forget … the distinctions of data as 'them' and the researcher as the 'self', then we may arrive at a better understanding of the issues under scrutiny. I found that the whole data, like a flower bed, may, from a distance, appear to be brown, but when observed close-up, be found to contain vivid whites, reds or yellows. The researcher needs then to identify which colour among the flowers she considers most significant, and to alter her gaze accordingly. (ibid)

This 'sitting on one's data' and pondering with a degree of reverie until one sees there is colour within the apparent grey, is what helped the researchers to see what was going on in the focus groups carried out during the pandemic. 'Reverie' is used here as suggested by Ogden (1997) to refer to how psychoanalysts need to take time to reflect on the meanings encountered with patients and to connect with an 'analytic third' that exists between them and their patients. This in turn, we think, connects with the notion of the uncomfortable third-space thinking which is sometimes necessary to get to de-centred meanings (Holliday and Amadasi 2020: 18).

By altering the habits through which we usually had dealt with the structures before the pandemic, the unexpected nature of the online focus group, despite all the difficulties, represented an opportunity to shuffle perspectives of observation and reflection. Understanding the importance of the children's texts (the colour in Duan's

words cited above), rather than just thinking how dreadful it was not to meet them face-to-face (the grey), did not come easily or immediately. Taoism implies a deep complexity of things that is often difficult to see.

Within Taoism, Duan comes to yin and yang, as represented in Figure 2, where opposites curl around each other, and the dots inside each half indicate that each also contains the seed of the other (2007: 248). This better represents how the opposing discourses can be present at the same time even in the same person, and that all of us can sometimes, at different times and for different reasons adopt the established essentialist discourse even if it means denying who we know we are as represented in the simultaneous more personal hybridity discourse. The figure indicates that there is a complex curling around each other of the competing discourses which reminds us that in reality they very often seep and blur into each other.

There could be many reasons for this contradictory coexistence. It may be that we are not aware of the presence of competing discourses, that we are just too tired to resist, or that it gives us recognition within particular settings, roles, and structures. It may be strategic essentialism, where we appear to adopt the stereotypes imposed upon us in order to temporarily gain space in the face of oppression (e.g. Motamedi et al. 2016, Danius and Jonsson 1993, interviewing Gayatree Spivak). It may be that we actually wish to be considered or taught to be 'native' in the essentialist sense because 'assimilation' seems the only way. Then we would need to consider how far all of this might be the result of some sort of false-consciousness, which, in turn, further interrogates our role and responsibility as researchers and educators.

Reflection on quantitative data collection

These observations about the probable mixing and curling around each other of contradictory discourses of culture might help explain the difficulty in getting clear pictures during research. Accounts of the quantitative part of the CHILD-UP project, **49**

reported at the second project meeting in Krakow in 2020, indicated that the complexities of the settings often defied being pinned down. The agreed definitions of concepts such as 'migrant' and 'intercultural training' did not fit what was or might have been going on. There were problems gaining access to institutions and people, especially in the last months due to the COVID-19 outbreak. This was affected by different social and political conditions in different country and local settings and their diverse agendas, needs and positioning.

The example of what carrying out online focus groups in Italy taught us unexpectedly about the yin-yang relationship between essentialist and non-essentialist discourses and the hybrid nature of how migrant children's creativity and agency can be curled around and inside educational structures is one instance of experience. In different countries, each with their policies and structures, and with research teams working in different ways, other types of instances might be possible, found and noticed. It is difficult for quantitative research to capture this diversity. Looking for children's participation in online focus groups across all countries might not work and may miss other equally valuable instances. A macro-ethnography of what sorts of things are going on in different locations is therefore necessary. This may enable a fil rouge or a highest common denominator to emerge – a label that relates across instances which can then enable a quantitative search.

The disaster of the pandemic served to bring into sharp relief the nature of this complex diversity as educators and researchers struggle to do their work in settings that vary hugely in how they respond to the conditions imposed upon them.

Certainly for the future we should consider preceding quantitative data collection with some sort of macro ethnography so that we are better informed about what sorts of quantitative questions to ask and by what means. This is the other way round to what is commonly thought, where it is wrongly believed that 'quantitative research' is somehow safe in its objectivity and therefore provides validity for 'qualitative research' that follows.

We also need to remember that we researchers are people who solve problems of representation and voice. One such problem is how to satisfy sponsors who are looking for objective statistical outcomes to inform policy while at the same time including the rich more subjective findings that represent the de-centred hybridity discourse of culture. This requires skilful writing. It also requires clarity of thinking in which we can distinguish operational definitions from constructed realities – the difference between agreed definitions of 'migration' and how it is constructed by the people we try to understand in our research, including our own constructions.

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