

## PhD students, interculturality, reflexivity, community and internationalisation

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**ABSTRACT** Interviews with a small group of doctoral students at a British university indicate that the students feel that the programme provides an environment within which they develop interculturality through reflexive engagement with the PhD community and in some cases with the participants in their research. Significant here is that they are interpretivist, constructivist qualitative researchers within a larger university community of qualitative researchers where there is a shared reflexivity that is at the core of interculturality. They also bring with them existing cultural complexity with which to engage, build on, make reflexive sense of and resolve in this experience. This complexity which they all share make it difficult to consider them differently as 'international' or 'home' students, which are revealed as inappropriately divisive labels within an intercultural community. Where there are apparent issues with English as a second or other language among some of the students, it is realised that this represents a broader struggle, shared with all students, regarding self-expression in writing. These findings demand cultural belief in whatever backgrounds the students come from. This belief impacts on how we understand internationalisation and the nature of academic knowledge and process.

**KEYWORDS** Interculturality; research methods; higher education; doctoral; internationalisation

This paper considers the perceptions of nine current and recent students regarding the cultural impact of their PhD applied linguistics programme at a university in the south of England. The purpose of the study was to interrogate the proposition that there may be a conflict between British PhD study and the cultural orientations of 'international' students. However, while the students were both 'home' and 'international', they resisted any notion of cultural conflict along these lines and talked generally about a shared development of interculturality through a reflexive engagement with cultural identity. The study also connects with recent

discussions surrounding cultural identity within the internationalisation of higher education in Britain and elsewhere.

### Research orientation

To contextualise the research, it is important to reflect on the two questions, accompanied by glosses in brackets, that the participants were asked to respond to:

(1) What impact has doing a PhD had on your cultural identity? ('Cultural' may be interpreted in a number of ways and you are of course at liberty to contest the term or define it in a way that you like.) **[end of page 206]**

(2) What do you think about the dominant view in some areas that doing a PhD in Britain is a particularly Western activity that might not have sufficient recognition of other backgrounds? (Here you might also consider what you know of the experience of others.)

There is a tension between the two questions that emerges from the significant paradigm change in intercultural communication studies which has come to full realisation in recent years (MacDonald and O'Regan 2011). The first question represents an opening up of how we look at what is going on when people from different cultural backgrounds travel and engage with each other in new domains. It is no longer possible to talk simplistically about cultural differences or what it is like to travel to 'another culture' as though it is a solid and bounded place (Dervin 2011, 39, citing Baumann). This opening up results from a postmodern realisation that the concept of culture is socially and ideologically constructed (e.g. King 1991; Keesing 1994; Holliday 2011; Dervin and Machart 2015), and a critical cosmopolitan view that culture is open to travel and creative innovation across boundaries (e.g. Delanty, Wodak, and Jones 2008; Holliday 2013b). Hence, in the first question, I try to imply not imposing a particular vision of culture by referring to cultural identity and emphasising the possibility of defining culture in different ways. It is relevant here that all the doctoral students and graduates in the study have themselves been involved in research which touches in some way on a critical vision of culture and will be familiar with these discussions.

The second question is arguably less open in that it leads the participants to consider a particular viewpoint. This is because I wished explicitly to test what has been a dominant preoccupation with the perceived 'problems' presented by 'international', and especially 'international' doctoral students in British universities because they are presumed to come from solid cultures that are incompatible with the autonomy and criticality necessary to be successful in their studies. The implication here is that such students either have to learn this autonomy and criticality by being in the British university environment or will have difficulty in succeeding. A common example of this viewpoint concerns East Asian students who have been characterised as coming from collectivist national cultures, and is particularly exemplified in Zhao and Coombs (2012). They argue that Chinese national culture, embodied by the

Chinese education system and the learning of Chinese characters, is instrumental in inhibiting criticality and creativity. The postmodern perspective criticises this viewpoint for being essentialist, by positioning people within solid national cultures that define and confine who they are and what they can do, and for following a naïve positivist paradigm that denies the ideological construction of culture (e.g. Dervin 2011). Zhao and Coombs, nevertheless argue that because of their national cultural deficiency, Chinese students need a Western education to enable them to carry an innovative criticality back to their own culture to improve it with an 'individualist voice' (2012, 250). Furthermore, reference to the employment of a sociocultural educational transformation, especially with the work of Bruner (Zhao and Coombs 2012, 247), while hinting at the possibility of cultural travel across boundaries, seems to infantilise the Chinese students as it resonates with bringing up primary school children to adulthood. When applied to adults, this notion of transformation therefore increases the patronising sense of improving a deficit culture through Western intervention (2012, 250).

The notion of cultural incompatibility also comes from writers who claim a resistant Periphery position in relation to a Western academic hegemony. Examples of this are the struggles for recognition: of the value and validity of African history and scholarship, where the dominant view is that 'Europe is teacher and Africa is pupil' (Asante, Miike, and Yin 2008, 3), of Islamic science and epistemologies (Shah 2010), and of more creative and non-positivist views of education in Iran (Ghahremani-Ghajar and Mirhosseini 2010). With reference to doctoral study, Qureshi suggests that there is a 'relational' aspect of social life in Pakistan that makes the application of Western research ethics problematic. She explains that 'the range of choices and degrees of freedom available' to the researcher 'are determined by how s/he is introduced to community members and what relational category/categories are assigned to him/her' (2010, 90). The polarised 'West versus the rest' discourse of culture to which these writers seem to subscribe does however need to be interrogated (Holliday 2013b, 109). **[end of page 207]** As an example, Shah (2010) provides us with a far more complex account of the relationship between 'Islam' and 'the West'. He describes a long history from the Crusades onward, often of conflict but sometimes of dialogue and the passing of the baton of scientific advance from one side to the other, woven through with shifting economic and political circumstances. The implication is therefore that this is not a matter of cultural proficiency or deficiency, but of circumstance, politics, power and historical narrative.

One such political power narrative that is well-recognised is the overall lack of recognition and over-writing of non-Western culturalities by Western definitions (Hall 1991). There is however a danger that the polarisation evident in the 'West versus the rest' discourse may inadvertently support what I have called a West as steward discourse (Holliday 2013b, 109) that has an ostensibly well-wishing though in effect patronising view of non-Western cultures as either in need of protection or deficient and need developing – as is evident in the notion of transformative intervention to bring individualistic criticality to Chinese students implied by Zhao and Coombs (2012) cited above. Within the internationalisation agenda in British

universities this has sometimes been converted into what amounts to a dropping of standards to allow for 'other cultures' to do 'what they can do'. Hence, 'we have to give them space to be who they can be because they can't be like us unless they become Westernised'.

### The participants and the data

It might be argued that the West as steward discourse is fed by a neoliberal tendency within the internationalisation agenda, to give the appearance of equality and diversity by acknowledging the rights and value of 'international students', but in effect allocating them a 'special needs' space. I therefore felt the need to exercise great caution in how I labelled my participants. Distinguishing between 'home' and 'international' students would not be a matter of neutral fact, but would potentially make me complicit in an act of Othering. While writing this paper I also witnessed a seminar presentation by one of the members of the PhD student community to which my participants belong, who made this very point regarding how she was becoming increasingly wary of how she labelled her own research participants within a British university setting, and stimulated considerable discussion among the rest of the group (D'Costa *in process*; Odeniyi *in process*). It was therefore coming from the community of students itself that I needed to question all assumptions about who my participants were. Indeed, in the data itself, P1 makes the point:

It was because labels were so complex and multifaceted that they really did not matter anymore. The labels were still applicable to me and were part of my identity, but the exact meaning was for me to decide for myself. (P1)

This questioning had significant impact on how I interpreted what they had to say in the interviews. Furthermore, that the voicing of this questioning came from the community itself also gave me greater cause to notice the importance of the PhD community in my data and my own location as a researcher within that community. Indeed, the entire discourse of difference between 'home' and 'international' is seriously shaken by what emerges from the data.

This intervention of putting aside significant labels is implicit in the discipline of bracketing, or putting aside known researcher preoccupations that might skew the collection and reading of the data. To counter suggestions that cannot free themselves of their preoccupations, the simple act of not allowing myself to write about my data within the confines of these labels did lead me to see unexpected other things. While seeing them all as international may not be so unusual, I had not before thought of them as all at 'home' as cultural travellers, wherever they are. Bracketing enabled me to see better; and what I saw helped me to bracket.

I therefore need to describe the participants as minimally as I can without losing some sense of their diversity. I need to indicate something about their diversity because, while I need to put on hold the 'home-international' division, I am interested in how this diversity

interrogates this division. I approached all those who were currently enrolled or who had graduated within the last two years. [end of page 208] Nine agreed to take part (an American, living and working in Mexico, a Bangladeshi living and working in the UK and Kuwait, three British, a German Iranian having lived and worked in the UAE, a Malaysian, a Mexican, and a South Korean). This listing is alphabetical by passport nationality. Four are full-time, five part-time distance, six are self-funded, and three have non-British government scholarships. I mention this information because it is of interest to the sector. I take care in my discussion of the interview data not to indicate any of these details except where they emerge naturally from the data along with other indications of diversity. Throughout participants will be referenced only by a letter 'P' to indicate 'participant', and a number that indicates their position within an alphabetical list of their first names.

The data amounts to 6700 words of email text that I initially read to find common codes and then themes. However, as I proceeded I found that the data was not sufficiently extensive to find significant repetition codes. On the other hand, there was evidence of an overall thick description generated by the juxtaposition of the accounts, which is enhanced by the sense of community that emerges from the data, where the participants inter-refer to a common place. My thoughts about the data are then organised around thematic headings that emerge from this thick description. Being driven to interrogate identities and roles in the research process also raises acknowledgement of how soft the data is. Despite comprising actual email text sent to me by the participants, it represents what they decided to say at a particular time motivated by particular questions within a particular event set up by a researcher who projects a particular orientation within their lives also as researchers. This presence of a bigger complexity, where the interviewer and subject co-construct meaning is now well-established within a constructivist, interpretive paradigm (e.g. Baumann 1996, 1). I am therefore very aware of making major authorial decisions about which bits of the data to extract that are personal to my writing agenda. These choices also extend to not indicating where phrases have been cut within sentences and paragraphs and the occasional tweaking of sentences to improve readability. In all cases participants were given the opportunity to see pages of the final manuscript where their text has been used and to ask for changes.

### The data

In this section I present an overall picture of what the group of PhD students as a whole were telling me about their experience. This is organised around the themes that concern the nature of interculturality, reflexive response to themselves, each other and the PhD community, and the relevance of a West versus non-West, or 'home' and 'international' divide. Because of the space available I will save a discussion of the data to the following section.

*Expanding interculturality*

One of the elements that emerge from the data concerns the experience that several of the participants reported concerning how the PhD enabled an expansion of their interculturality.

P2 explains:

For me, this multi-nationalist context became much more broadened simply because of my contact with other PhD students from around the globe, such as China, Korea, Iran, Kuwait, Germany, Jamaica, South Africa, France, and of course the UK. As a PhD student my identity as one who has had some degree of immersion within multi-nationalism has become more entwined and enriched. (P2)

He describes his previous 'degree of immersion' in some detail:

I grew up in the Chicago suburbs that were then mostly first-, second-, and third-generation Europe-American; in my suburb, mostly that of Irish and Italian descent. I also attended school(s) that were both progressive in the sense of offering full funding to what at least then were termed 'minority' urban students, primarily African- Americans, Puerto Rican-Americans, and Hispanics. (P2)

P1 also speaks about expanding her own existing trans-cultural identity by reflecting on the identities of the participants in her own study: **[end of page 209]**

Before I even started doing my PhD, when people would ask me where I was from, I would answer that I was a 'citizen of the world'. A simple answer of saying I was from Bangladesh (my nationality) would not automatically be linked to the fact that I was born and raised in Kuwait, which is something that has had a significant impact on my upbringing but was still not my nationality. Add to that my American accent. There wasn't even a complex answer that could thoroughly describe my identity.

Doing my PhD was an enlightening process. Not only did I get a chance to delve deeper into the world of Kuwaiti university students, but through my questions to them I also began to question myself. I began to explore areas of my identity that I had accepted as given without further investigation. (P1)

P9 makes reference to a real expansion of her cultural identity in her engagement with Britain:

I want to be seen as a well-educated Brit just like the people who I had every contact with, and I wish to continue the life that they enjoy and share. I think it is just like a mix and match. I take the aspects of a Brit and a Korean that I fancy and help me to be a person who I want to be. In a way, it can be said to be a

self-justification. As I think I have sufficient experiences of living in both countries, I have a kind of image of myself which is developing, and I seem to decide to take and throw away the aspects of life or myself. (P9)

*Reflexive responses*

Implicit in P1's account is a reflexivity that she develops through the practice of her PhD. P6 refers to this explicitly as she describes the disciplines she is asked to apply at the beginning of her programme:

I remembered the first meeting with my supervisors after I sent my first draft of my research proposal. They told me to 'detach' myself from my experiences as a teacher educator, free my mind and start fresh. Clearing myself of my professional knowledge and experiences was not easy. After nine months battling with myself to adapt to another way of thinking, understanding and looking at things, I think I have developed into someone who is more reflexive, a better listener and more observant of things around me.

I think doing a PhD in the UK is more liberating. The research is mostly determined by the researcher, and the supervisors are there to support and facilitate where necessary. (P6)

P1 explains more how she employs this reflexive struggle meaning with the participants in her study throughout her PhD study:

Towards the end of my research period, I started to find it more and more difficult to continue. I felt like I was perhaps looking for answers that were not there. When students shrugged their shoulders when asked about the influence of globalisation on their cultural identity, were they being uncritical? Or could the students' acceptance of the contradictions of the world be a symbol of the way the world actually was now. (P1)

That P1 is able to respond to her participants in this reflexive manner also has something to say about Qureshi's statement above about the need to respond to relational cultural realities. Through an understanding of her own identity complexity she has a way into understanding them which, not without struggle, helps her to look back at herself not only as a researcher but also as a person. Therefore:

Aside from being an amazing experience in terms of learning more about research and different discourses related to academia, education, and culture, the best part of doing my PhD was the unexpected journey of self-discovery. (P1)

*Combatting prejudice*

Three of the participants talk about the beneficial impact of doing a PhD on varying degrees of prejudice. P1, again, speaks of her life after finishing her PhD:

Within the past two months I have experienced discrimination based on me holding a Bangladeshi passport, judgment based on me being Muslim but not wearing a hijab, and criticism for my choice to teaching Jiu-Jitsu and self-defence instead of holding an academic teaching job at a university. Before doing my PhD I would have probably let these opinions about me have a negative impact. (P1) **[end of page 210]**

P4 also talks about an assault on her cultural identity when she first comes to the UK to do her PhD:

I remember that when I was filling out my application form to start my studies I found a question that said 'mark your ethnicity' – and from all the options given, I couldn't find anything that made sense of me or that I could relate to. So I just marked 'other'. That incident was just the starting point. When I was in the UK I was asked many times if I was really a Mexican, since my physical appearance told them that I was not from the UK but from India. I didn't dress like what they expected from a Mexican. I was asked if in Mexico we had TVs or if we had cars. (P4)

But then she says that the association with the PhD helps to provide an overriding identity status, and also helped her to develop her own sense of identity:

As soon as I told them I was doing a PhD in a British university, then people looked at me with other eyes with interest and as if I had an extra characteristic that made them interested in what I was doing. The PhD changed my vision in terms of who I was and how I related to others. This had an impact on my cultural identity because I was not seen only as a Mexican. I don't think I suppressed my Mexican identity, but I saw it more as adding another experience to my life. (P4)

P8 also feels it necessary to juxtapose the experiences of multiple identities and prejudice with the countering value of the PhD programme:

Although I still identify as British Asian I think my PhD research experience has made me identify and appreciate the black African experience even more than before. Recent global responses to Ebola outbreaks have intensified my feelings of injustice. This week my teenage son reported his science teacher said she was scared of catching Ebola and how another teacher stated how dangerous Nigeria is because you can be kidnapped for no reason. My son, of Nigerian



heritage, is flunking school badly and I wonder if his poor educational attainment and comments like these are related. I am British, Asian, and African at the same time.

There is a strong belief that something tangible like an educational qualification cannot be denied and therefore helps to combat discriminatory employment practices in Britain, Australia and elsewhere. (P8)

Juxtaposing her account with that of P1 and P4 also further supports my earlier point about the blurring of boundaries between 'home' and 'international' students.

### *Struggling with language*

Another example of this blurring relates to mention in the data of English language ability, which is a key area of anxiety across the university sector with regard to 'international' students coming to Britain to do doctoral studies. Despite the linguistic diversity of the participants in the study, only one makes explicit reference to this. P7 here is referring to the linguistic circumstances of being a German Iranian and working professionally in English; and is initially troubled by positioning herself within the 'non-native speaker' label, again, within the context of conceptual struggle expressed by several of the other participants:

I guess what can be related specifically to doing a PhD is the intensive writing and reading process with all its emotional and psychological ups and downs. Although I really don't use my mother tongue, Farsi, anymore, I started the process with a nagging, always-present consciousness of being a non-native speaker. I had little experience with studying in an English speaking country. So, my worries were, and I have to admit they still are, mainly about to what extent am I able to express myself, or my thoughts successfully. This was and still is at all levels of using the right word, or finding the right word to how I compose or discuss my points. (P7)

However, when P7 finds out more about what is going on with other students, she begins to see that they share her struggle regardless of their linguistic background, and that language is not actually the core issue:

It was not our language abilities that were the issue but something deeper was going on. In the second year when I went back for my annual review, I took part, more actively, in the discussions and seminars, etc. It was these exchanges with my colleagues, native or non-native, that made it very clear to me that part of my feelings at least academically are shared by the others as well. [end of page 211]

I have had to (am still dealing with this) find a way of raising my voice in my writing. Talking to my fellow researchers every year and on the Skype this year, I've learnt that I'm not alone in having these problems. Almost all my colleagues

have talked about their questions and hesitations about how to explain their thoughts and discussions. In my last review session, it was quite interesting to hear comments which are the same as those I give to my own students, e.g. think of your reader all the time, write in a way that she or he understands your point, etc. (P7)

Once again, the community of students is a major factor the perception of issues. P7's reference to a gradual integration into the community that was then sustained through Skype contact with other students relates to her part-time distance status, not unlike the other part-timers in the group.

#### *Common safe spaces*

The PhD community continues to emerge throughout the data as a valuable resource for the participants to express and engage with their multiple identities. A clue about how this community is able to provide this resource is suggested by P2. He speaks not only of his community of applied linguistics students, but also:

The larger group of PhD students constitute different cultural spaces determined by academic groupings. I must say that I felt a 'safe space' or 'common area' amongst all the PhD students as well as the faculty and thesis supervisors. At least to me, it seemed that regardless of the different countries which we came from, we all spoke to the same general academic aspirations and concerns. We, thus, seemed to hover around unified and common academic-cultural identities. One example would be that of the qualitative researcher. (P2)

P2 here is speaking of a wider cross-disciplinary community of research students that is characteristic of the university in question. Relatively small numbers of students in each discipline encourage the coming together of students in a wider community. The generic researcher development programme run by a centralised graduate school indeed has as one of its aims to build this cross-disciplinary community. Furthermore, there is a high incidence of qualitative researchers across health, sport science, media and education as well as applied linguistics that enable these disciplinary groups to come together in research events with a common methodological language.

#### *Different for everyone*

There is however another side to this that is to do with the strangeness of PhD study for those who have not yet become part of it. This is not however particular to non-Western potential applicants. Indeed, the statements so far already suggest little evidence within this small group of students to support the dominant discourse that non-Western students have more difficulty. It does however seem significant that P3 suggests that doing a PhD is strange for everyone, drawing on his own professional experience in a British university:

I encounter a number of students who come to the UK with the idea of doing a PhD, but to many of these students, the whole PhD process is somewhat of a mystery. And yet, I felt exactly the same way when I thought about undertaking one even though I was a relative 'insider' working within a British university. And I think the element of 'mystery' can affect people regardless of any particular category they could be placed into such as 'Western'. (P3)

This certainly resonates with my own experience as the head of a graduate school who has advised a wide range of both British and other people who are interested in doing a PhD. Certainly, British students can be just as mystified about the process as anyone else, even if they have already been students in British universities. P3 also comments on his impression of the variety of practices within the system:

Even in Schools (like Education) where one would expect significant similarities, I hear stories about their processes where there appear to be significant differences. So this is just one university! I can't imagine how many various practices there are across the whole of the UK. I'm aware of some particular differences in different [end of page 212] countries or particular universities through talking to students, but these differences seem no more significant than the differences between practices even in just one university such as my own. (P3)

This may seem to contradict the image of a common PhD culture already suggested by P2. This will indeed depend on the university and the disciplines involved; and there might not be the same cross-disciplinary culture as at the university in this study, also described above. Qureshi's point earlier about incompatibility between a research methodology and the cultural setting of her research may also depend very much on the paradigm of ethnography within which she was supervised (Holliday 2013a). P5 suggests that it is in the nature of universities to have essentially unfamiliar environments wherever they are found:

Like many industries, universities can be insular and not recognising other backgrounds because they have a status to maintain, a professionate to protect and mystique to foster. (P5)

And P8 suggests that there is something about the nature of West that makes it unable to appreciate other cultural realities:

I think there are many Western activities, and ideologies, which do not pay sufficient attention to the backgrounds of others and which are accepted and internalised as the way things are. (P8)

This disbelief in the effectiveness of universities to respond to the 'backgrounds of others' resonates with my earlier comment regarding the West as steward discourse and neoliberalism, and P4's already cited annoyance at not finding official identity categories that suit her.

P8's own research, as does the research of other applied linguistics students in the larger group, looks at the disconnect between institutional identification of students and their identity needs and who students really are.

#### *West or non-West*

The diversity in backgrounds of the participants contains the potential for them to claim Western and non-Western, majority and minority identities. Yet they do not seem to have any particular resonance with the 'West versus the rest' discourse implied in my second question about cultural incompatibility and conflict. Several indicate ambivalence if not explicit caution with regard to the West-non-West distinction. P1 makes the following point:

To be honest, I never thought of doing a PhD in Britain as a particularly Western activity. In fact, of the PhD holders I know, almost all of them are not British (or American) but instead come from an Asian background. Moreover, being on the recruitment committee for Kuwait University, I saw that attaining a PhD from a Western university gave the candidate much more credit and value, regardless of their nationality. (P1)

This resonates with what is well-known about the status of Western PhDs that brings students from all over the world. P4 also comments on the particular status of the British PhD in Mexico. However, P1's observation does lead me to think about this phenomenon in a slightly different way. The overall tone of the data suggests a variety of people with diverse backgrounds coming together with an overall sense of ownership of the PhD programme. P1's comment therefore speaks not of 'international', non-Western students coming from elsewhere to grapple with an essentially alien educational experience, but of an experience that belongs to all of them. The data suggests that all parties find the experience a struggle, but a worthwhile struggle that takes them to new and highly meaningful domains in their research and in their identity as cultural travellers. At the same time, cultural travel is not only from far way non-Western locations to British higher education, but for everyone regardless of where they begin their trajectories.

#### Broader meanings

What the nine participants are telling me about the impact of a particular PhD programme on their cultural identity brings broader observations about interculturality, the potential for PhD study, and [end of page 213] internationalisation. The often unexpected nature of the findings both from what the participants have to say, the particular nature the PhD community to which they belong, and the research approach, allow the significance of these observations to emerge.

*Interculturality and small culture formation on the go*

I began the study by asking the participants about cultural identity. What emerged were strong statements about multiplicity which are represented by an interesting array of references – ‘multi-nationalism’, ‘entwined’ (P2), ‘citizen of the world’, ‘complex and multifaceted’, ‘stepping beyond the labels’, ‘complex, international, cosmopolitan’ (P1), claiming the nationality in which the PhD study is located (P9), ‘not seen only as Mexican’ (P4), ‘British, Asian, and African at the same time’ (P8). There is some resonance here with Cattle’s (2012, 11) observation that ‘many people now claim multiple identities’ with relation to ‘faith, nationality, ethnicity and place of residence’. But what I wish to draw attention to is not so much the multiplicity of product, but rather the process that is alluded to, which in turn leads me to the notion of interculturality, my first theme in the data section.

I find interculturality a useful concept with which to make sense of the data because of Young and Sercombe’s (2010, 181) suggestion that it involves ‘a dynamic process’ of intercultural sense-making which can lead to ‘innovation and the adoption and adaptation’ of cultural behaviour. I also find useful the idea that there is no need to use the notion of cultures as solid blocks of experience to understand intercultural processes (Dervin 2014). The participants notably do not refer to travelling from one culture to another at all. They seem more concerned with the contribution of their experience as PhD students to making better sense of their own cultural identities that themselves seem to be shifting and uncertain. The PhD programme does not seem to represent a separate culture to which they have to adapt. It is rather a cultural domain with particular resources that enables a deeply reflexive, or self-interrogating interaction between the participants, who somehow become owners of the whole process.

My understanding of interculturality is therefore that it is a more seamless process whereby we employ our existing cultural experience to engage with new cultural domains within which we can also find ourselves, and we make new sense of the existing cultural identities of ourselves and others. There will also be creative innovation within the new domain. And for the PhD students this takes the form of the innovative interpretations that come from and impact on their personal research projects. New cultural domains can therefore contribute deeply to who we are, as newcomers undoubtedly contribute to the domains they find themselves in. What the PhD community provides in particular to encourage this are the explicit disciplines of reflexivity within research talk to enable this.

This process of engaging with multiple aspects of the PhD experience also resonates with the notion of small culture formation on the go. I define this as the daily construction of culture through the invention and performance of routines and even small rituals as we engage, plan, solve problems, get used to things, and move from one group to another (Holliday 2013b, 56). In one sense the PhD programme is a small culture in that it is a set of behaviour with recognisable rules and routines, other examples being work settings, schools, families, friendship groups and so on. However, what the participants have to say, along with a more

seamless concept of interculturality, plus Dervin's (2011) anxiety about reifying any form of solid culture, means that the notion of small culture also needs to be looked at more cautiously. The small culture formation on the go idea does however help here in the sense that the small culture is not the PhD programme, but the dynamic intercultural relationship which the PhD students form with it, which continues to change as they develop and innovate with this relationship. As understood elsewhere in my (2013b) grammar of culture, it is the personal trajectories that each student bring to the process that enliven and populate it. Indeed, it is these trajectories that they spend some time describing – the existing concerns about cultural identity that have developed from the life experiences that have brought them to this point – P2 [end of page 214] growing up in Chicago, P8's family circumstances, P1's multiple national backgrounds, P7's history with her 'mother tongue', P6's strong professional discourse, and so on.

#### *Ownership and community*

The strong sense of ownership of their PhD community and its processes, that all the participants express, might have something to do with the particular nature of the doctoral programme itself. I hesitate to use the term community of practice (Wenger 2000) because I feel that it is often used as an education device to inculcate certain types of behaviour, rather as suggested with regard to the Chinese students in Zhao and Coombs (2012) referred to earlier. It is true that the PhD programme to which these people belong is all about developing research discipline, as indicated in particular by P6. However, in accommodating the particular cultural trajectories the participants bring with them, it can be argued that the programme allows de-centred ownership by encouraging the criticality and reflexivity that all the participants as research students are able to bring to it.

This sense of a de-centred ownership has implications for the structure versus agency debate referenced by Block (2013). My grammar of culture indicates the presence of national or other structures that provide the backdrop for our upbringing through education, religion, politics and so on. The PhD programme, situated within the structures of British higher education, represents such structures. However, at the same time the grammar indicates a significant domain of personal cultural trajectory and small culture formation that are set in dialogue with these structures, and within which the action behind the participants' statements lie.

#### *De-centred research*

The opportunity that the participants have to be reflexive about themselves and their research, and to contribute a de-centred criticality to the PhD community, is largely dependent on the qualitative research approach that the programme and the broader community of researchers in the university espouses. There is an overall tendency towards a postmodern research paradigm. This paradigm has at its core a recognition of the co-constructed dialogue

between the exigencies of the research setting and the trajectories of researchers (e.g. Guba and Lincoln 2005; Holliday 2007), and is at the core of the now long-standing critical turn in ethnographic methodology (Clifford and Marcus 1986). This means that PhD researchers are encouraged to engage with who they are and how this impacts on and leads to a deeper understanding of the research setting. This not only opens the way for the multi-directional reflexivity so evident in the data; it is also set up to respond to and learn from the relational nature of research settings described by Qureshi in the earlier part of this paper. Indeed, this research approach is designed to respond to the relational nature of society everywhere. Understanding the relational nature of interaction between the participants and the PhD programme is a key part of this paper.

This need to learn from marginalised realities is well-recognised by some critical sociologists (Hall 1991). Several of the participants in this study, along with other members of the PhD group to which they belong, are themselves researching these hitherto unrecognised and marginalised realities both within Western and non-Western communities. Indeed, as a group, they contribute to the understanding that combats the polarised notion of 'West versus the rest' discourse, while revealing the marginalities that are caused by the often hidden politics of neoliberalism.

#### *Standards, belief and disbelief*

The data also suggests no evidence that PhD students from particular cultural backgrounds need allowances making for them that would result in a drop in academic standards. The academic school within which the participants reside has long experience with students from a wide range of backgrounds and has always applied exactly the same criteria for all applicants. The potential for creative, [end of page 215] critical and reflexive engagement with a qualitative research project is always required in the initial research proposal and the interview. During registration, where difficulties have been experienced with regard to these criteria, these could not be correlated in any way with student cultural or national background. This experience resonates with the statements from P3 and P7 that the PhD programme is strange for everyone and that language issues are underpinned by issues of self-expression shared by everyone. This does not however mean that the programme is not culturally sensitive. As suggested above, this sensitivity resides within the reflexive nature of the research approach. A considerable amount of time is spent within supervision to ensure that students carry out research that is appropriate to their setting in terms of content, methodology and researcher positioning.

This egalitarian approach to standards is aligned with my recent experience during a bilateral meeting to discuss government-funded masters graduates coming from North African to Britain to do PhDs. A North African university professor stated explicitly that they did not want any drop in standards, but that they needed to learn how to access a foreign university system in terms of application processes and programme structures. There are several ways

to read this statement and therefore to respond to it. What I have referred to as *cultural belief* (Holliday 2013b, 135), that people from all cultural backgrounds have the same intellectual potential as any British applicant, but are simply disadvantaged by local knowledge, would enable the statement to be taken in the spirit with which it was delivered. 'We are equal, but have different knowledge bases'. On the other hand, *cultural disbelief*, promoted by the West as steward discourse, would not believe that the North African students would have this potential, and would think that the speaker was underestimating something he did not understand because of his own cultural position. Because of the association between cultural disbelief and the West as steward discourse, any suggestion that students from particular cultural backgrounds might need different standards, implying lower standards, is patronising. Where lack of student performance is not expected, the places to look must instead be the robustness of admissions criteria and the responsiveness of academic approaches and supervision to research settings without loss of rigour. I am not here necessarily arguing for a postmodern approach, but for approaches that respond to the political and ideological circumstances of research and knowledge.

The cultural belief that the participants in this study demand is now emerging in some quarters of university internationalisation. There is a shift from seeing Western education as a gift to the deficient non-West, towards collaborations which value 'the long standing research, governance and educational traditions of partner institutions in both the East and West' (Lewis and Montgomery 2015) and that recognise and respond to the resilient richness of life experience that students from diverse backgrounds bring to higher education (Caruana 2014).

## Conclusion

With a small study of this type, with a small amount of data, I cannot claim any form of representativeness. The participants are not intended to be a sample of any particular population. The value of the study is therefore in observations arising from a very specific group of people and the experience of researching them that may help us to think differently about others. As PhD students, themselves researching in areas that are relevant to this paper, they were able to be articulate about some of the deeper issues, which in turn opened up a range of questions not only about interculturality, PhD study, the nature of internationalisation and the value of the common labels in 'home' and 'international', but also about how researchers engage with participants in qualitative studies. Much of the discussion therefore moved around the special nature of the students, a particular programme, and the research event. The importance of this was that things could be seen which often remain invisible in qualitative studies. What has been possible in the paper has been to begin to get to the bottom of important relationships between different types of students and their programme [end of page 216] in a university setting, which I hope will resonate with researchers thinking about other types of students, researchers and events.



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