2   Studying Culture

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Summary

In this chapter I use a social action "grammar" of culture to indicate the different and interconnected forces that act on culture and Intercultural Communication and provide different foci for research. This picture follows a postmodern paradigm in which culture is a socially and politically constructed concept. The study of culture therefore moves away from differences between cultures and towards the question of how people construct and use culture to make sense of each other. Underlying universal cultural processes imply that all of us are equally engaged in the everyday construction of and engagement with culture wherever it is found. The focus of research is therefore on how these processes bring us together but at the same time pull us apart, as global politics, nation, ideology, and discourses of culture create imageries of difference. With the focus on the construction of culture, the research approach is constructivist and uses ethnographic, qualitative methods.

In looking at the way in which culture should be researched within the broader field of intercultural communication it is important to respond to an exciting period of paradigm change in the field. A positivist, modernist paradigm which attempts to measure and define cultures as solid, fixed, separate geographical blocks which confine the behavior of the people who live within them, is giving way to a postmodern paradigm which recognizes that culture is a fluid and socially constructed entity (Crane, 1994) which is politically and ideologically charged (King, 1991). Within
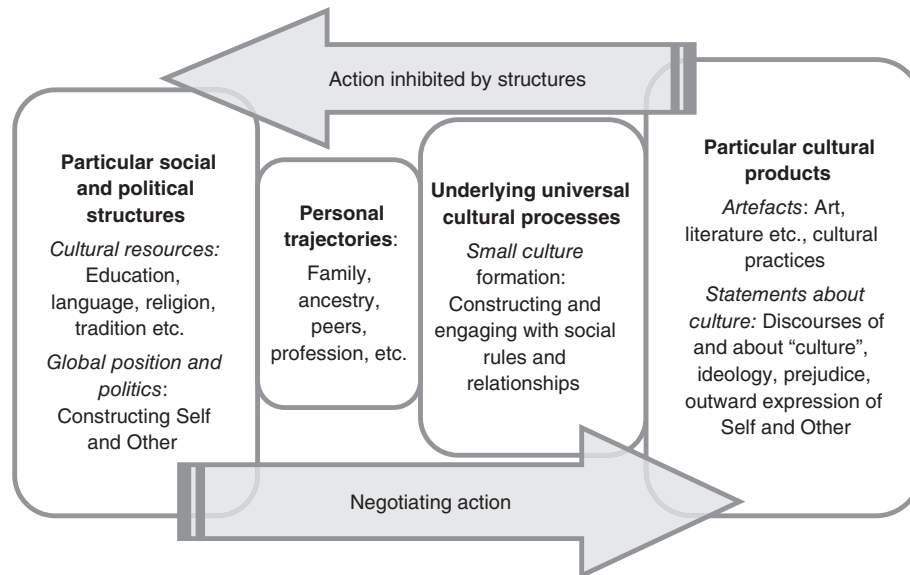
Particular social and political structures

Cultural resources: Education, language, religion, tradition etc.

Global position and politics: Constructing Self and Other

Personal trajectories:
Family, ancestry, peers, profession, etc.

Underlying universal cultural processes

Small culture formation: Constructing and engaging with social rules and relationships

Particular cultural products

Artefacts: Art, literature etc., cultural practices

Statements about culture: Discourses of and about "culture", ideology, prejudice, outward expression of Self and Other

Action inhibited by structures

Negotiating action

Figure 2.1   Grammar of culture. (Adapted from Holliday, 2011, p. 131; 2013, p. 2.)

the spirit of this postmodern paradigm I therefore follow two broad approaches to culture and to research.

An interpretive constructivist approach appreciates the uncertain, subjective and constructed nature of culture. With specific reference to the relationship between culture and society, I also follow the critical cosmopolitan approach in sociology, which suggests that we are all able to engage creatively with and take ownership of culture wherever we find it (Beck & Sznaider, 2006; Delanty, 2006; Grande, 2006), and the sociology of Max Weber (1964) which recognizes the dialogue between the individual and social structure. While Weber carried out extensive investigation of two major culturally influential systems, Protestantism in Western Europe (Weber, 1950), and Confucianism in China (Bendix, 1966), he always acknowledged the ability of the individual to stand creatively apart from them. This is in sharp contrast to the structural-functionalist picture of an organic social system which contains and defines the behavior and values of the individual, as set out by Emile Durkheim (1933) and later Talcott Parsons (1951), which has influenced so much of what might now be called an essentialist notion of national culture in recent decades of Intercultural Communication studies, which has been very influential in the positivist paradigm.

My interpretation of Weber's social action model is presented in my grammar of culture in Figure 2.1. The grammar is purposefully loose and complex to emphasize an unwillingness to define culture too closely, to mirror its ill-defined nature in everyday reference. It indicates a number of areas that need to be kept in mind when designing and carrying out a research project. I shall therefore use it to signal both what needs to be researched and the methodological issues and disciplines that need to be considered when doing so. I shall therefore first look at the constructivist

interpretive approach and then at how each part of the grammar might generate research projects.

An Interpretive Constructivist Approach

The relationships within the grammar broadly indicate an interaction between structures and products, on the left and right, both mediated by politics and ideology, and the way that individuals construct meaning as they build their lives. There is also a complexity and uncertainty in the grammar that implies that explanation can never be complete but must emerge gradually through successive layers of hesitant investigation and interpretation. In contrast to more experimental research approaches, an interpretive constructivist approach invites a richness of variables through which the meanings implicit in this complexity can begin to emerge with a distinctively healthy uncertainty (cf. constructivism, in Zhu Hua, Chapter 1, this volume).

To allow full expression of this delicate relationship between culture and research, the approach is able to take in a wide range of data collection strategies, ranging from full-blown ethnography, where communities are researched in depth for extended periods, to methods that employ an ethnographic approach. The core of ethnography here is that meanings are allowed to emerge from the deep fabric of social life rather than being prescribed by researcher agendas. The balance between emergence and prescription is of course subtle, because research and researchers do have agendas. Also, it was not until the 1980s that ethnography itself seriously engaged with the dangers of prescription (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). The danger of prescription would be where the questions being asked tend positivistically to determine or presume the nature of culture before beginning, and thus lead the research. For example, asking about the defining differences between two cultures presumes that there are two cultures with distinct features; and in interviews this can lead people to also think in these terms just enough to get very different responses than if this framing was not suggested. This is particularly the case when culture itself is such an open and interpretable concept that can mean different things to different people at different times.

The type of data collected is determined both by what is being looked for and what seems appropriate to the particularities of the social setting, which may emerge as important during the process of the research. In the classic ethnographic approach the focus and methods emerge after the researcher has entered the field (Spradley, 1980, p. 32). A range of different types of data could be relevant, such as what people say, write and do, artefacts such as choices of clothing, eating and so on, and the way in which people respond to surroundings and events. Looking at groups of people in specific social settings enables an investigation into how participants construct meaning as a group in response to the setting. Methods of data collection and analysis, whether interviews, focus groups, narrative, spoken interaction, documents, visual media, critical discourse analysis, conversation analysis, or language corpus analysis, must be deployed to allow the richness of social life to emerge and be sufficiently cautious to take the researcher beyond themselves.

The variety of possibilities means that strategic decisions about data and analysis need to be made throughout the whole process. This in turn emphasizes its inevitably subjective nature and the implicatedness of the researcher. The scientific validity of the research depends not on the control of variables and singularity of method, as in more experimental approaches, but on disciplines for approaching and looking at social events, and then making decisions. There needs to be a laying bare of the strategies of the procedure of the research: Who is the researcher? How are they related to the participants? What are their prejudices and beliefs? How may all of this affect the research, and what issues does this raise? And then, in relation to these issues: How is the relationship between the participants and the researcher managed? How are the participants to be approached? How are the research and the researcher to be presented to them? How are questions to be asked? In what events, in what settings, with what sorts of interventions, and why? What sort of space is allowed the participants, and will they have the opportunity to say the unexpected?

Other disciplines derive naturally from an ethnographic approach and are designed to prevent seduction by easy answers – a danger that is particularly evident with the strong academic and popular tradition, coming from the positivist paradigm, of perceiving culture as simplistically solid. Making the familiar strange and bracketing, or recognizing and putting aside our own orientations, are both designed to help researchers look beneath and beyond the traditionally expected. In talking about culture, steps must also be taken to help our participants to be similarly critical. Thick description, where different pieces of data are juxtaposed to build a picture of what is going on (Geertz, 1993, p. 6), also helps to reveal deeper, gradually built and unexpected connections.

Particular Social and Political Structures

On the left of the grammar (Figure 2.1), these are structures that in many ways form us and make us different from each other. They include nation, religion, language and the economic system, and correspond to the popular notion of culture in the national, regional or religious sense, though they will rarely map precisely onto each other. In effect, this domain provides us with cultural resources – the influence on our daily lives of the society where we were born and brought up, the way we were educated, our national institutions, the manner of our government, our media, our economy, and so on, which are different from nation to nation and will undoubtedly impact in the way we are as people. These are resources in the sense that we draw on them, but they do not confine everything we do and think.

Probable topics for research in this domain would be which resources individuals draw upon when they encounter unfamiliar cultural environments, and how they make use of them to make sense of and engage with the new. The critical cosmopolitan approach is particularly interested in cultural travel and valuing the existing cultural experience that travelers bring with them and build upon. Special care would need to be taken here regarding easy answers. Asking people the

straightforward question, "What cultural resources have you drawn upon?" might invite references to common stereotypes about their regional or religious culture, whereas the aim would be to go deeper to explore particular life, work or educational experiences. An example of this is John recalling the formalities of visiting grandparents in childhood in Britain when working out how to behave in family parties in Iran which seem very alien (Holliday, 2013, p. 145). Another is a Chinese student applying strategies she had learnt in China to the task of writing at an Australian university (Tran, 2009, p. 280). Wang's (2012) study of a Chinese business delegation in the US reveals a surprising cultural resource that both Chinese and US colleagues share, which brings them together across seemingly huge cultural barriers – that of humor. The data includes observation of meetings and debriefings with Chinese colleagues each evening.

The global position and politics domain concerns how we position ourselves and our society with regard to the rest of the world. This is influenced by how we are all inscribed by long-standing constructions of who we are in relationship to others, in our histories, education, institutions, upbringing and media representations. This attracts research into the representation of Self and Other – the imagination of who we are in relation to others – in a wide range of the texts and images that influence us. These might include advertising, film and television, literature, fine art, travel documents, written history, government and institutional policy documents, textbooks, and so on. There is an established body of research in this area. Some examples are the analysis of Western representations of the non-West in literature and fine art (Said, 1978), in tourism (Urry, 2002), in nationalism (Hahl, et al., 2015), in English language textbooks (Gray, 2010), and in school textbooks generally – prime locations for national narratives (Hahl, et al., 2015).

A major research methodology here is critical discourse analysis, which looks at the ideological content of texts. In terms of intercultural awareness, language students can be invited to carry out critical reading of such texts and images to learn appreciation of their cultural ideologies in their own societies and those of others (e.g. Wallace, 2003). When asking people what cultural resources they draw upon (see above), it is also possible to apply a degree of critical discourse analysis to what they say, because the choice of cultural resources will also be influenced by this Self and Other positioning. For example, when British John draws upon his childhood experience of his grandmother's house to deal with eating with an Iranian family one might ponder on what is behind this association with respect to perceptions of modernity and tradition, and ask him further how he is positioning himself with regard to visiting his grandmother.

Personal Trajectories

Moving into the center of the grammar (Figure 2.1), personal trajectories comprise the individual's personal travel through society, bringing histories from their ancestors and origins. Through these trajectories they are able to step out from and dialogue with the particular social and political structures that surround them

and even cross into new and foreign domains. Useful research here would be to invite narrative accounts from individuals who have traveled culturally or lived at cultural interfaces. What is crucial here is to encourage richness of detail and complexity in order to get beyond essentialist accounts of "visiting" different regional or religious "cultures."

Richness, detail and complexity which transcend essentialism can be found in existing narrative accounts. A well-known auto-ethnographic text is Eva Hoffman's (1998) account of living in North America with a Polish background. Another example is Stephanie Vandrick's (1999) personal account of the impact of her childhood as a missionary child in India on her professional life. Good literary fiction also provides excellent examples of the complexities of cultural travel. Excellent here is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2013) novel, *Americanah*, which recounts the story of a young Nigerian university student's experience of prejudice and identity with relation to culture, race and language as she moves from home to long-term residence in the US. What is significant about this is its being an account from the Periphery. By "from the Periphery" I mean feeling in the position of always being defined by others (Hannerz, 1991). Adichieh's account is very much one of a person being able to use unrecognized cultural capital from Nigeria to stamp her identity creatively and innovatively on being in the US, eventually to the extent that she can return to her native Nigerian English in maintaining her identity.

Seeking understandings of Periphery cultural realities is very much a theme of critical cosmopolitanism as well as critical theory, where non-Western realities have been hidden by a top-down, Western-led globalization (Bhabha, 1994, p. xiv; Delanty, et al., 2008; Kamali, 2007), and "the margins begin to contest, the locals begin to come to representation" (Stuart Hall, 1991, p. 53). The Periphery stamping identity on Center cultural domains therefore becomes a form of bottom-up globalization. This point relates to all the research discussed in this chapter, where in all cases it is important to look beyond traditional views of regional or religious cultural difference. Therefore, one might encourage research which brings de-centered accounts, whether from so-called Western or non-Western participants. By this I mean that they should be bottom-up, starting with the detail of everyday experience, rather than beginning with the grand narratives of cultural difference. Through this process it may well become apparent that the traditional cultural categories of who people are may be found inadequate, and the results of cultural travel itself may not be what is expected. In an interview study of 28 people of diverse national backgrounds I discovered that personal trajectories covered whole life experiences which traced back to ancestry, through professional and friendship groups, as well as travel to, and sojourn in, foreign national locations. Helping participants to develop their narratives can be a far from straightforward process. Researchers need to be prepared to engage in co-construction and to offer their own experience of life history (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 117). This is demonstrated in my own study of a single interview, where I interrogate my own role in helping my interviewee to construct her cultural history (Holliday, 2012).

Seeking de-centered accounts is not the same, in my view, as non-Western accounts which present a polarized "us"-"them" picture of culture conflict by countering Western essentialist pictures of the non-West with equally essentialist accounts of non-Western cultural attributes that are being denied. This is a particular version

of the "West versus the rest" discourse which results in self-marginalizing or self-Othering (Kim, 2012; Kumaravadivelu, 2012, p. 22).

Underlying Universal Cultural Processes

So far I have not distinguished between people from different cultural backgrounds in my discussion of research. There will of course be immense variety in cultural practices between different cultural locations, which will provide variety in the cultural resources which individuals can draw upon, variety in cultural practices (see below), and variety in how people in different locations are treated or perceived within the global politics of world cultural positioning. However, the central domain of the grammar (Figure 2.1) indicates that the basic manner in which we engage with culture, wherever we find it, is shared by all of us. These underlying universal cultural processes involve skills and strategies through which everyone, regardless of background, participates in and negotiates their position within the cultural landscapes to which they belong or with which they engage. This is the basis upon which we are able to read culture creatively wherever we find it.

At the core of the underlying universal cultural processes domain is small culture formation. The research which this invites in intercultural communication studies should be the detail of how we form culture on the run, or how we form and perform routines and rules that enable us to make sense and interact in the process of daily construction of culture (Holliday, 2013, p. 56), and how we do this in diverse and new cultural locations. This is at the core of intercultural competence and awareness, and of interculturality. One area of research would be to look at the detail of how people interact through observation of behavior, analysis of talk, or self-reporting of instances of interaction. The latter could be recall of experience through logs, diaries, field notes, personal narratives, reconstructions, and so on.

Here, again, it is important to move away from traditional preoccupations which have often looked at miscommunication as the medium product of intercultural communication, and then sought to solve the problem through increased understanding of foreign practices. Instead, research on this area needs to look at the manner in which misunderstandings are negotiated as a normal part of everyday small culture formation. In terms of developing intercultural skills, the focus here would move to an understanding not so much of difference but of the sorts of processes we all go through to resolve communication issues. Here, going back to the use of cultural resources, we would apply an understanding of how the processes of resolution already work in our past everyday experience – of how we already have the basic mechanisms for engaging with miscommunication – asking questions, making allowances, finding middle ways, negotiating, sorting out face, and managing Self and Other.

This area will also take in all the research related to other sections of the grammar in that all of them relate in different ways to underlying universal cultural processes and small culture formation.

Particular Cultural Products

On the right of the grammar (Figure 2.1), these are the outcome of cultural activity. The first domain, artefacts, includes the "big-C" cultural artefacts such as literature and the arts. This is clearly a traditionally rich area for a wide range of research. These artefacts also include cultural practices, which are the day-to-day things we do which can seem strange to people coming from foreign cultural backgrounds – how we eat, wash, greet, show respect, organize our environment, and so on. These are the things which are most commonly associated with "our culture" or national culture; but they also differ between small groups within a particular society. Within a critical cosmopolitan paradigm, these practices take on a different significance to the more traditional view that they represent deep values that characterize the people who "belong to that culture," who practise them. Instead they represent a set of behaviors which are accessible to outsiders in the same sense that practices in a particular organization are accessible to new employees in that organization given the politics and structures which might include or exclude. In other words, their accessibility depends on politics; and any statements that they are somehow sacred in their rootedness in "blood and soil" are indeed political. This understanding opens the way to the important concept within critical cosmopolitanism of contestation of practices in the public domain (Delanty, 2008, p. 93). Research in this area could therefore look into the us-them politics surrounding cultural practices – how they are formed and protected, how they are rationalized by their adherents in terms of histories and traditions, how they are presented to newcomers, and how inclusion and exclusion operates. Such research could again involve ethnographies comprising observation of behavior, analysis of interactions, and interviews with and accounts from participants.

At the core of this research will be the key set of phenomena in the second part of this domain of the grammar – statements about culture. These are the way that we present ourselves through what we choose to say about our cultural background. These statements can often make claims about regional or religious cultures such as "in my culture we are always on time," "we don't make decisions without consulting the group," "we respect our parents" or "we value the individual." Such statements must not be taken at face value because they can project idealized images of how we see ourselves. Dervin (2011, p. 187) makes an interesting point about stereotypes. Rather than discussing whether or not they are true, we should investigate why people wish to construct them in the way they do. The same would apply to statements about culture.

Useful research could therefore be carried out to investigate what is behind such statements. This could involve exploring the underpinnings of their constructions through interviews and narrative enquiry, but also direct observation of these constructions in interaction and group behavior. Dervin & Machart's (2015) edited collection on how culture is treated as an excuse in a wide range of social settings is an important contribution here in that, by means of interviews and critical discourse analysis, it looks at how culture is used by different groups, from governments, through minorities, to performers and in fine art to promote either political or micropolitical identities. This research would contribute to the understanding of underlying universal cultural processes and small culture formation. It would also

help the understanding of processes of inclusion and exclusion in cultural practices. Angouri & Glynos (2009, p. 11) report how, by following up questionnaire data with in depth interviews, it was discovered that European company managers' initial statements about the importance of national culture were by no means what they appeared to be. They conclude that "treating 'culture' as floating signifier in organizational practices means treating it as a window into which subjects feel it possible to project their meanings, aspirations and fantasies" (2009, p. 14). Amadasi (2014) uses focus groups and conversation analysis to explore how the children of immigrant families in Italy construct diverse images of cultural identity in opposition to an expected deficiency through cultural alienation.

Cultural Negotiation

The themes of inclusion and exclusion related to cultural practices relate to the arrows across the top and the bottom of the grammar (Figure 2.1). In Weber's social action theory everyone has the potential to dialogue with structures of their society. However, the degree to which this potential can be realized will depend on other forces of tradition, politics, hierarchy, and prejudice acting against it. Intercultural competence will also be mediated by these forces. When we travel, the degree to which we will be able to engage creatively with the practices we find will also depend not only on the restrictive forces acting against us, but also the restrictions of prejudice, hierarchy and tradition which we carry with us. In this sense, all the research proposed in this chapter needs to address this politics.

At the center of the prejudice which continually inhibits cultural travel and expression are global position and politics on the bottom left, and discourses of and about "culture" on the right of the grammar. The former have already been discussed in the particular social and political structures section. In Holliday (2013, pp. 109–110) I introduce working titles for a number different discourses. I have already referred to the "West versus the rest" discourse above which encourages an us-them polarization. I define discourse as a way of using language which represents ideas about how things are. Discourses can be a powerful means of establishing ideas and forms of behavior. Particularly powerful in this respect is the popular "essentialist culture and language" discourse which maps precisely nation, language, culture, and behavior onto each other. It has been noted by a number of critical sociologists that this discourse, promoted by nineteenth-century nationalism, has had a long-standing influence on social science in the form of a methodological nationalism (e.g. Beck & Sznaider, 2006). This discourse clearly encourages a divisive picture of culture which confines us to images of ourselves and others which keep us apart.

The essentialist culture and language discourse is, however, converted into prejudice by two further discourses. The "cultural relativism" discourse, while claiming equality and mutual respect between cultures, encourages the view that people outside the West, confined by collectivist cultures, should not be expected to participate in the individualist activities which are thought to characterize Western people, such

as critical thinking, autonomy, and self-determination. In effect this is a patronizing exclusion of people who are thought not to be able to do what we can. This patronage is deepened by a "West as steward" discourse, in which Western people feel that they are in a position to help the non-West to develop. In a number of places in Holliday (2013, pp. 16, 70, 157) we see people who do well in Western domains being congratulated by Western friends or colleagues for having learnt from the West and a denial that they bring anything of value from their own cultural background. There are also other cases where people are met with deep prejudices based on long-standing yet mistaken narratives about where they come from (Holliday, 2013, pp. 84, 89, 138). The outcome is a particularly hidden form of prejudice which appears on the surface to be well-wishing – a neoracism which hides beneath presumably innocent talk of cultural difference (Spears, 1999; Wodak, 2008, p. 65).

   The area of cultural prejudice is a particularly difficult to research because so much remains hidden, not just between the lines of apparently mild statements, but also by the powerful essentialist culture and language discourse that has been promoted by the positivist paradigm for a considerable time, which projects intercultural communication as an entirely neutral matter. Also, there is not just one but a number of discourses which work together to weave a significant smokescreen; and, as has been clear throughout, key concepts such as culture, discourse, and the West are themselves highly contested. Critical discourse analysis of documents, conversations and interactions in which there is comment on performance between residents and newcomers would be important ways forward. Narrative-based studies with long-term sojourners would need to be prepared to dig deeply into how they had been treated. There would need to be a principled shift from the view that "problems" with cultural "competence" are caused by the orientation of the cultures from which people come, to a more positive view that they are caused by the prejudices which they meet.

Case in point

Holliday, A. R. (2013). *Understanding intercultural communication: Negotiating a grammar of culture*. London: Routledge.
Baumann, G. (1996). *Contesting culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
In this section I will look at two studies. One, my own, which explicitly addresses the exigencies of my grammar of culture, and one which also broadly represents an interpretivist constructivist approach. In each case I will pinpoint a particular method which I believe helps the study to address the issues raised by a postmodern paradigm in looking at culture.

In my 2013 book, *Understanding Intercultural Communication: negotiating a grammar of culture*, I employ what has been described elsewhere as creative non-fiction (Agar, 1990). This involves writing ethnographic reconstructions of composites of observed events, interviews and other circumstantial data. It is designed to address the problem that much of what is witnessed in everyday life is hard to catch in more

established qualitative data. The validity is based upon the application of the ethnographic disciplines of making the familiar strange, bracketing, and thick description. This is practised in the writing of the narratives, where:

1 everything can be sourced to real events,
2 there is an adherence to what has been seen and heard with minimal embellishment of adjectives,
3 characters are allowed to take on a life beyond the intentions of the writer,
4 a further character who interrogates the views being expressed is always introduced,
5 statements about culture or discourses of culture always come from the characters and are interrogated by others.

The narratives are always followed by a further interrogation of what they mean and the agendas of the characters. I do also make it clear that I am subscribing to a critical cosmopolitan discourse and therefore do not look for solid culture difference. Therefore, in all cases, the characters in the narratives are not different because of their different cultures, but in the ways in which they align themselves or are faced with different discourses of culture in the different settings in which they reside.

Gerd Baumann, in his 1996 book, *Contesting culture*, reports an ethnographic study of how culture is constructed in everyday life by different individuals and communities in a multicultural London suburb. He observes how individuals construct and use culture to mean different things at different times depending on the topic of conversation, and can have multiple membership of cultural groups and activities. He notes how "culture-making is … a project of social continuity placed within, and contending with, moments of social change." The people in his study "reify cultures while at the same time making culture" (1996, p. 31). He is able to arrive at these observations, finding ways to get around dominant discourses of culture, by applying the discipline of thinking of his participants as people rather than starting with the view that they belong to specific cultures.

Conclusion

Looking at researching the intercultural from a social action perspective, within a postmodern paradigm, and employing a constructivist and interpretivist perspective has necessarily taken in a wide range of possibilities. On the one hand the options are wide open, with the potential for multiple forms of data, as they relate to almost every aspect of social life. The recognition that subjectivity and creativity in research is viable releases researchers to employ everything they bring with them to make sense of the intercultural world. On the other hand, however, in a world that is shot through with hidden discourses and ideology, and politics and prejudice, there is need for researchers to apply immense rigor as they manage their relationships with these obscure and shifting forces of which they are a part.

Key Terms

Discourse A way of using language which represents ideas about how things are.

Essentialist Explaining people's behavior as the essence their culture, and that all people from that culture will behave in that way.

Neoracism A form of rationalizing the subordination of a defined group of people on the basis of culture even though race is not an explicit agenda in the minds of the people concerned.

Prejudice Images built on prior formulae for Self and Other representation.

Small culture A cultural environment which is located in proximity to the people concerned.

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