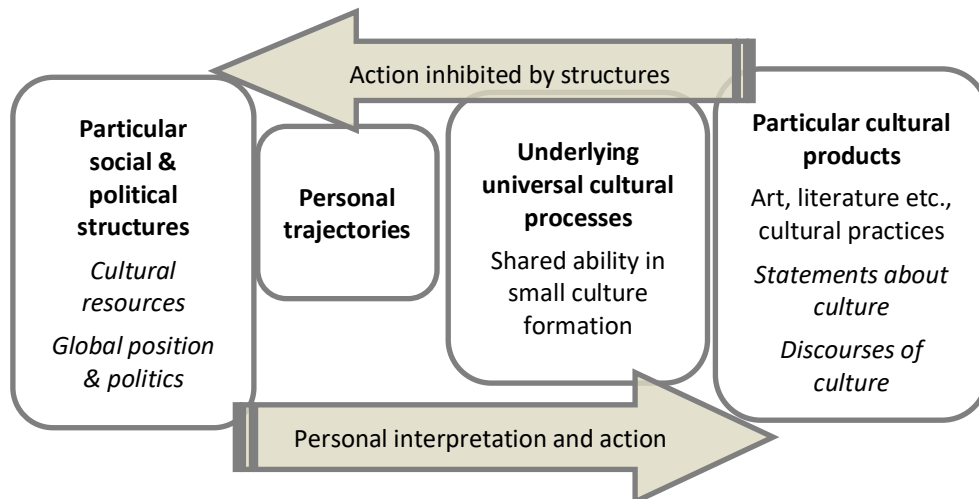


## Shared experiences, expanding cultural horizons, and problematic discourses

Adrian Holliday, Canterbury Christ Church University, posted at <http://adrianholliday.com/articles>, May 2014<sup>1</sup>

In this paper I argue the potential for all of us to share cultural experience in such a way that we can expand our cultural horizons, especially within higher education settings. An example is presented of three university students, Jenna, Bekka and Malee, who each struggle to get to know each other. The possibility for expanding cultural horizons is clearly there. They are inhibited not, as one might have thought, by national cultural differences, but by prevailing discourses of culture which apply prejudices about what is possible in cultural behaviour.

To help make sense of what happens between the three students, I will use my grammar of culture (Holliday 2011: 131; 2013: 2), which is summarised in the figure. The grammar represents a loose set of relationships along the lines of Max Weber's social action theory, in which individuals have the potential to take action and negotiate the structures of their societies (e.g. 1964). However, there are destructive discourses about these differences which can stand in the way. The three students struggle with these discourses; and Bekka in particular is in danger of deepening rather than overcoming cultural prejudice.



Discourses of culture are at the bottom right of the grammar<sup>2</sup>. These are ways of talking about culture which represent particular theories about the nature of culture. They are par-

---

<sup>1</sup> Versions of this paper have been presented at Manchester, Helsinki and Exeter Universities during 2013 and 2014.

ticular cultural products because they are constructed projections of cultural identity. The interaction between the three students in the narrative will demonstrate that these discourses are also motivated by the global positioning and politics of how we see ourselves in the world which we inherit from our particular social and political structures, at the bottom left of the grammar. It needs to be noted that these discourses are ideal types – temporary, operational categories used to try and make sense of what is going on which we must not be seduced by (Weber 1968).

Jenna, Bekka and Malee

The narrative of the interaction between Jenna, Bekka and Malee is taken from Holliday (2013: 70). It is reconstructed from conversations with students and colleagues from a variety of backgrounds, and from research into the experiences of home and international students in British and Australian universities<sup>3</sup>. Jenna and Malee come from a common location which is foreign to the location of the narrative, while Bekka is a home student<sup>4</sup>. It is important here not to specify which countries they come from. Although there is reference in the narrative to a Western-non-Western division, this comes from the characters and their perceptions of how they are positioned rather than a necessary particular location. I shall take the narrative in short stages for ease of discussion.

Jenna had found it hard to make friends with local students and was surprised when Bekka began to take notice of her and wanted to have coffee after class. She wondered if it had anything to do with her having joined in a classroom discussion and talked about how at home there was a tradition of voting out figures of authority in extreme circumstances.

This refers back to an earlier narrative (Holliday 2013: 64-65), where Jenna and Malee have taken action to find ways to speak out in university classes because they realised that they were getting a reputation for being 'passive' and 'non-critical' because of what people imagined about their 'culture'. To do this they drew on their cultural resources from home (left of the grammar) - hard work and always having space and time to prepare what they needed to say in class. The example of voting out figures of authority was the best one that Jenna could think of to illustrate that her countrypeople are not passive and uncritical. However, despite Bekka's show of interest, Jenna does not get the response she has expected:

---

<sup>2</sup> There are a number of discourses of culture listed in detail in Holliday (2013: 109-110). Descriptions of the grammar and the discourses can be found at <http://adrianholliday.com/articles>.

<sup>3</sup> Caruana & Spurling (2006), Clifford & Montgomery (2011), Grimshaw (2010), Harrison & Peacock (2009), Jones (2009), Montgomery (2010), Ryan & Louie (2007), Ryan & Viète (2009).

<sup>4</sup> I am colour coding the names to help the reader to remember the respective identities of the students.

When they had coffee Bekka said that she was interested in what Jenna had been talking about and very surprised because she had heard that her culture was very hierarchical and authoritarian. Jenna replied that she had heard so many things about the local culture which did not seem to be true, like people always being on time. She had noticed so many students turning up late. Bekka said that from what she had read this would be explained by Jenna's culture being collectivist while hers was individualist.

This response puzzled Jenna because the point she was making was that there was room for variation in both cultures. Bekka explained that individualist cultures were different because they were based on valuing self-expression and determination and therefore there could be a lot more variation of behaviour and people were free to not be on time if they wished, and that that would be respected.

Bekka therefore responds to Jenna's unexpected contribution in class by trying to reconcile it with the collectivist stereotype within an established essentialist culture and language<sup>5</sup> discourse.

- **Essentialist culture & language discourse:** Separate, exclusive, national, regional or religious cultures define, contain, limit and predict the traits and values of the people within them. **Innocent:** claims objective and egalitarian truth

This is however not surprising because it is the default position which many of us fall back on when faced with an unfamiliar cultural encounter. It has been argued that mapping language, very often national culture, and behaviour precisely onto each other in this way has been promoted in both social science and popular media since the 19th century by a pervading European notion of nationalism (e.g. Beck & Sznaider 2006). Indeed, the more Jenna questions dominant cultural expectations, the more Bekka continues to insist that it can all be explained by the difference between their respective individualist and collectivist cultures. Because the innocence of this essentialist culture and language discourse maintains that it is protective of people's right to be culturally independent, it may well be that Bekka would deny being essentialist and reducing Jenna to a near racist stereotype.

However, it is revealed that this common way in which the discourse differentiates between 'cultures' is not as innocently neutral and appreciative of difference as it claims to be when Bekka associates individualism with valuing self-expression, self-determination, and being more varied and creative. Especially the reference to being 'free' implies a superior condition implicit in individualism, and invokes a sense of global position and politics – implying that people and societies which are confined in collectivism are not able to be 'free'. This sense of veiled superiority from Bekka continues:

---

<sup>5</sup> Language is not at issue in this particular narrative. However, the strong association between a single language and single culture is a common feature of this discourse.

As time went on Jenna felt that her relationship with Bekka soured. The more Jenna felt she was coming out and asserting herself in front of local students and tutors, the more Bekka went on about how different their cultures were. Then, in one of their coffee sessions, Bekka announced that she had noticed a remarkable change in Jenna – that she really had become so Westernised. Jenna wasn't sure how to take this.

She felt that Bekka was congratulating her; but Malee was horrified when she mentioned this to her and said that the people here just couldn't stand the idea that foreigners could be as expressive, independent and critical as they were without having learnt it from them and having become assimilated into their ways.

Jenna's ambivalent suspicion of the apparent praise of being Westernised is confirmed by Malee, who sees a West as steward discourse in Bekka's attitude.

- **West as steward discourse:** Modernity and progress resides only in the West. Tacit well-wishing support for people from non-Western cultures. **Innocent:** claims objective and egalitarian well-wishing.

The important point here is that this discourse would normally not be recognised by its subscribers. In the same way that the essentialist culture and language discourse does not recognise its own essentialism, subscribers to the West as steward discourse are only conscious of being well-wishing. Bekka therefore would disagree with Malee's accusation that she was being deeply patronising. Calling someone Western would be construed by Bekka to be a compliment, even though, at the same time, she would hold the essentialist view that gaining what the West has to offer would mean no longer being a 'real' member of the culture of origin.

The third discourse which comes into play in this narrative is a tacit critical cosmopolitan discourse.

- **Critical cosmopolitan discourse:** Cultural realities are open, negotiable, contestable, and often unrecognised, marginalised and hidden by Centre-Western discourses. **Ideological:** recognises ideological and political construction.

This is implicit in Jenna's attempt to contest the statements about the home culture regarding time keeping, and the belief that she and Malee are able to engage with and find ways of being themselves in this new cultural environment. This discourse also carries the criticality which suspects that the innocent essentialist culture and language and West as steward discourses are not innocent at all. And finally, as Malee is angered by the patronising attitude of Bekka, she also subscribes to the 'West versus the rest' discourse, which accuses her of Western duplicity.

- **West versus the rest discourse:** The West is dominating the way culture is conceptualised and holds powerful notions of what is 'normal', 'desirable',

‘proficient’ and ‘deficient’. Always defining Centre versus always defined Periphery.

**Ideological:** recognises ideological and political construction.

### Implications

One has to wonder why it is so hard for **Bekka** to get the message that her reading of what is going on is so different to that of **Jenna** and **Malee**. One answer may be the particularly powerful nature of the essentialist culture and language discourse. Its success is based on being an easy, literal script for speaking about culture which everyone can use. It therefore provides the shared language for all three characters in the narrative despite their different viewpoints. They all use the term 'culture' with the common implication that it is regional or religious. **Jenna** and **Malee** do not have an alternative language to make their opposition strongly evident. The critical cosmopolitan discourse is acted by **Jenna** but not spoken in a way that **Bekka** can recognise. Therefore, all talk of culture and difference will be associated by **Bekka** back into the dominant essentialist culture and language discourse. The consequence is that almost everything that **Jenna** and **Malee** think and do remains unrecognised.

This dominance of the essentialist culture and language discourse is also ironically supported by the ‘West versus the rest’ discourse, which **Malee** voices in opposition. This discourse of resistance presents a polarised image which also feeds the essentialist, literal view of culture. Indeed, an unfortunate outcome of this anti-Western resistance has been a self-Othering reverse essentialism through exaggerating non-Western traits and values (Kim 2012; Kumaravadivelu 2008).

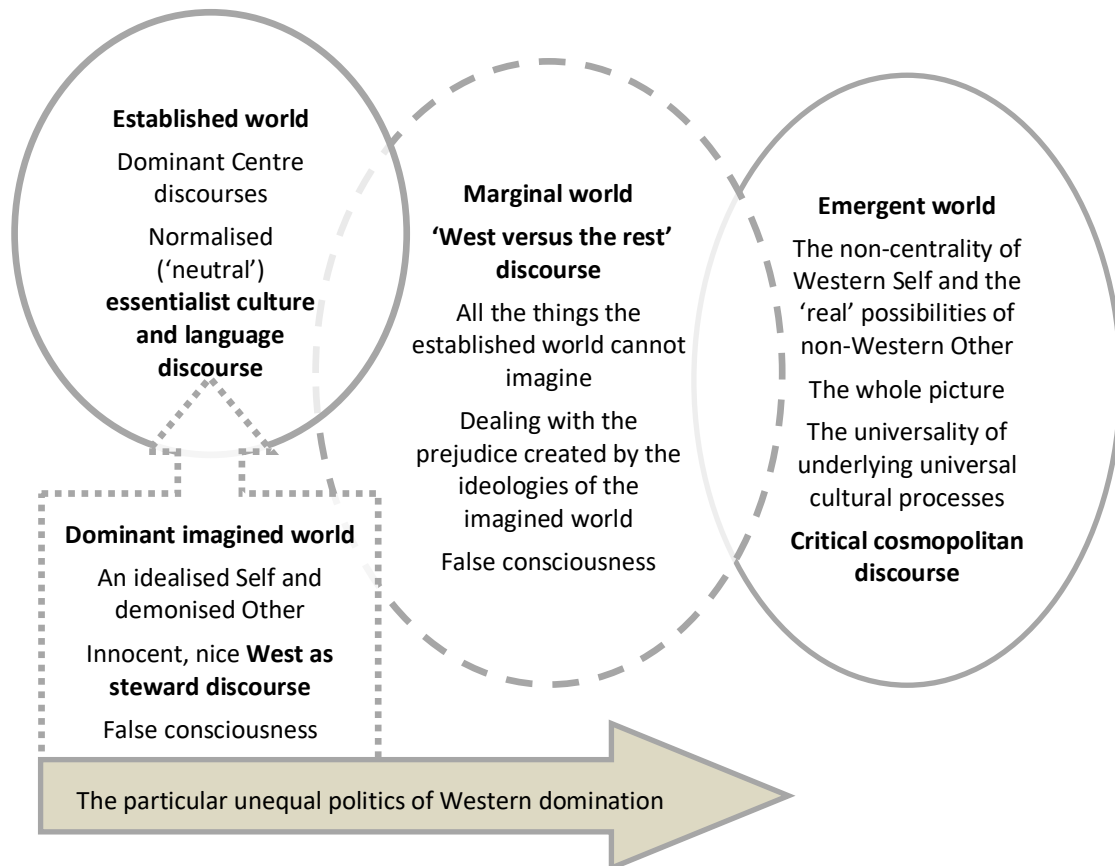
All of this means that any recognition of the patronising and Othering nature of the West as steward discourse is very hard to establish outside particular academic circles. The depth to which its aggression is veiled by good works is ironic:

The modernists never really waged war ... Quite the contrary! All they did was to spread, by force of arms, profound peace, indisputable civilisation, uninterrupted progress. They had no adversaries, nor enemies in the proper sense of the word —just bad pupils. Yes, their wars, their conquests, even their massacres were educational, of course! (Latour 2006)

The reference to modernism relates to its apparently clean neutrality in the advancement of progress. But at the same time, **Bekka's** apparent praise of **Jenna** is like the praise of a ‘bad pupil’ who is now doing well. The final but unrecognised irony is that while **Bekka** might think that **Jenna** is learning from the West how to be critical, **Bekka**, who is travelling culturally, is in fact being far more critical than **Bekka** who is not travelling at all.

The next figure has been developed from the one in Holliday (2011: 188) to help make sense of the politics of perception evident in the narrative. The *established world* is represented in the narrative by the essentialist culture and language discourse which is promoted by **Bekka** and provides the language for all three characters to speak about culture. It is normalised as neutral and matter of fact, in the sense that it is the ‘thinking-as-usual’ way of talking about things. The *dominant imagined world* is named in this way because it under-

pins the established world. It is however the world of ideology of which we are 'standardly unaware', as Fairclough (1995: 36) puts it. This explains why the 'West as steward' discourse is so hard to see except by those who are critical of it. It is revealed between the lines of the established world only by critical discourse analysis. It is a world which imagines the relationship between the Self and the Other. The established world does not recognise that what is being imagined as imagined *because* the essentialist culture and language discourse is experienced by its users as neutral and, indeed, not a discourse at all.



The *marginal world* is the one which [Malee](#) inhabits when she speaks the 'West versus the rest' discourse. The problematic nature of this discourse, in the way in which it ironically supports the essentialist culture and language discourse, as noted above, is partly explained by its positing within this domain. It is fired by resistance against the prejudice of the essentialist definitions imposed upon it; and to get its message across it needs to have its own but obviously oppositional essentialist concepts which can be understood within the essentialist mindset. It might indeed be argued that the manufacturing of oppositional but equally essentialist counter definitions is the most effective way to package and make understood what cannot be imagined by the established world. However, an unfortunate outcome is that this also pushes the more complex postmodern realities of the critical cosmopolitan discourse further away from accessible consciousness. The degree to which this process results in false consciousness, as implied by Kumaravadivelu and Kim (op. cit.), is of course debatable. We do not know what is behind [Malee's](#) statement.

The *emergent world* is what the critical cosmopolitan discourse attempts to express. It is the world that Jenna attempts to access when she struggles to introduce cultural creativity on the basis of her own background. This is an unrecognised 'real' world in that it represents the possible in the domain of cultural activity. Jenna does what she can with all her resources both brought and observed, from her immense store of underlying universal cultural knowledge and competence. She is a critical cosmopolitan actor; but whether she is recognised, misunderstood or thwarted will be to do with her resilience and perseverance, and the size of the resistance of prejudice that she faces from the *established* world. The top and bottom arrows of the grammar are about this - the pushing and pulling of the everyday struggle for cultural recognition. Malee will also continue to resist. It is Bekka who is more likely to remain uncritical of her position.

#### Positioning the researcher

As a postscript to this discussion I want to address the view that my own antagonism toward Bekka through the way that I position her in the narrative is a form of Westerner bashing. Stanley (2013: 45) makes the excellent point that in all my narratives the Western characters most often lack depth and understanding<sup>6</sup>. I can certainly accept this as a criticism because it is something I struggle with myself. Elsewhere I have said that I can only speak for my own experience and certainly not *for* any of the characters I present (Holliday 2005). This means that in my narratives the characters of whom I have little insider experience are built up from a thick description of interview, conversation and observation. Focusing on the characters I know least therefore means that I spend less time on detailing those I know best. Also, I do try and claim that what is Western or not grows out of what the characters themselves imply. I cannot however deny that this dichotomy is in the design, because one of my agendas in writing is to deal with the misunderstandings and conflicts that are to do with this dichotomy. Here I follow Stuart Hall. I feel strongly that the West-rest divide is a powerful force in global politics, at least in the minds of very many people who identify themselves as non-Western.

At the same time, there is no doubt that immensely destructive cultural prejudice exists everywhere and is very often levelled at members of the same communities. The West as steward discourse is therefore mirrored by similar discourse formations in many locations where long-standing aggression hides beneath a believed traditional cultural sense of doing what is good for the victims. This is very clear in two novels I have recently read about gender violence in Sikh communities in Britain (Sanghera, J. 2007; Sanghera, S. 2013). And I refer to literary fiction because it succeeds in showing the full complexity of what is going on, with fully rounded characters, unlike mine. In every setting, from very small to very large, there are conflictual relationships between people who knowingly or unknowingly

---

<sup>6</sup> She is referring to Holliday (2011); but the same is also true of Holliday (2013).

define (i.e. Centre), and those who are resignedly, unhappily or angrily defined (i.e. Periphery).

I do not believe that I am trying to put down the West. Instead I am trying to suggest that we Westerners can do better by moving from a *cultural disbelief* to a *cultural belief* in the real value of what is brought from outside our domain of understanding – from the *emergent world* in the figure. Understanding and being able to engage appropriately with this emergent world will empower everyone in the quest for human understanding. Of course, this emergent world is not really emergent at all. It has always been there, but hidden by cultural disbelief.

## References

- Beck, U. & Sznaider, N. (2006). Unpacking cosmopolitanism for the social sciences: a research agenda. *British Journal of Sociology*, 57/1, 1-23.
- Caruana, V. & Spurling, N. (2006). The internationalisation of UK higher education: a review of selected material. *The Higher Education Academy*. Retrieved from [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/the\\_internationalisation\\_of\\_uk\\_he](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/the_internationalisation_of_uk_he)
- Clifford, V. & Montgomery, C. (Eds.) (2011). *Moving towards internationalisation of the curriculum for global citizenship in Higher Education*. Oxford: OCSLD & CICIN (Centre for International Curriculum Inquiry & Networking), Oxford Brookes University.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: the critical study of language*. Addison Wesley Longman.
- Grimshaw, T. (2010). *Stereotypes as cultural capital: international students negotiating identities in British HE*. Paper presented at the British Association of Applied Linguistics Annual Conference: Applied Linguistics: Global and Local, University of Aberdeen.
- Harrison, N. & Peacock, N. (2009). Interactions in the international classroom: the UK perspective. In Jones E. (Ed.), *Internationalisation and the student voice: higher education perspectives* (125-142). Routledge.
- Holliday, A. R. (2005). How is it possible to write? *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 4/4, 304-309.
- (2011). *Intercultural communication & ideology*. Sage.
- (2013). *Understanding intercultural communication: negotiating a grammar of culture*. Routledge.
- Jones, E. (Ed.) (2009). *Internationalisation and the student voice: higher education perspectives*. London: Routledge.
- Kim, M.-S. (2012). *Trends in intercultural communication research – from a research culture of war to a research culture of peace*. Paper presented at the BAAL Special Interest Group in Intercultural Communication: intercultural communication in international contexts – training and development, practice and research, Open University, Milton Keynes.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (2008). The other side of Othering. *Independence*, 43, 17-18.
- Latour, B. (2006). War of the worlds - what about peace? *Matrix, Bridge The Gap*. Retrieved from <http://www.btg-japan.org/catalysts/bruno.html>
- Montgomery, C. (2010). *Understanding the international student*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ryan, J. & Louie, K. (2007). False dichotomy? 'Western' and 'Confucian' concepts of scholarship and learning. *Educational Philosophy & Theory*, 39/4, 404-417.
- Ryan, J. & Viète, R. (2009). Respectful interactions: learning with international students in the English-speaking academy. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 14/3, 303-314.
- Sanghera, J. (2007). *Shame* (Kindle ed.). Hodder & Staughton.
- Sanghera, S. (2013). *Marriage material* (Kindle ed.). Random House.
- Stanley, P. (2013). *A critical ethnography of 'Westerners' teaching English in China: Shanghaied in Shanghai*. Routledge.
- Weber, M. (1964). *The theory of social and economic organisation*. The Free Press.
- (1968). Ideal types and theory construction. In Brodbeck M. (Ed.), *Readings in the philosophy of the social sciences* (496-507). Macmillan.



