

## Submission, emergence and personal knowledge: new takes, and principles for validity in decentred qualitative research

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One of the biggest tasks in qualitative research is working out how to proceed within a set of practices which are now more or less established as immensely subjective. The reflexivity associated with this is deep, requiring researchers to engage both with their own subjectivity as well as the subjective complexity of social life. This realisation, and the acceptance of the inevitable nature of subjectivity, has grown out of a paradigm shift between a more established postpositivist position to a postmodern position. The *postpositivist* position retains aspects of a positivist paradigm. It holds on to the idea that objective truths can be described by means of systematic scanning of the territory through sampling and triangulation, or by extended surveillance in naturalistic ethnography, and that the researcher can be an impartial, distanced, unobtrusive, 'fly-on-the-wall' figure. This characterisation of postpositivism is set out by its critics (e.g. Gubrium and Holstein 1997: 19-33, Guba and Lincoln 2005, Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 1; Holliday, 2007: 16). The 'alternative' *postmodern* paradigm is associated with critical theory, feminism, constructivism, and participatory and cooperative approaches (Lincoln and Guba 2000). It rejects the 'naïve' postpositivist view of reality, and asserts that social truths and research methodologies are mediated by ideological, [page 10 ends here] social and political forces, that objectivity cannot be avoided, and that the researcher is interactively, reflexively implicated within the research setting (e.g. Gubrium and Holstein 1997: 9, Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 16, Faubion 2001). This paradigm shift within ethnography and social anthropology has also been associated with the publication of Clifford and Marcus's (1986) *Writing Culture* (Spencer 2001, MacDonald 2001), which asserts 'the constructed, artificial nature of cultural accounts' (Clifford 1986: 2).

In this chapter I will present three principles - of submission, emergence and personal knowledge - as a means of establishing rigour and discipline within a postmodern research methodology, to counter the accusation of being 'unsystematic'. I will also demonstrate, with reference to a series of research projects, how both a postmodern approach, and an application of these principles, has particular value in decentred research, where it is of paramount importance to allow what Bhabha (1994) refers to as 'vernacular' cultural realities to emerge in their own terms. Decentred research is by no means necessarily the projection of a Periphery voice against a Centre construction of how things are. I see it as the ultimate responsibility of critical qualitative research, in any circumstance, to make visible the unexpected for the purpose of revealing deeper complexities that counter established discourses.

Much of the material I cite, from my own research and that of colleagues and students, has been referred to elsewhere (e.g. Holliday 2007). However, the act of putting it together, in new juxtapositions, within the format of this chapter, has led me to new

insights about the relationships between the researcher's different 'takes' on the same research field phenomena - and how the three principles of submission, emergence and personal knowledge provide a measure for valuing Take 2 over Take 1 in each case. **[page 11 ends here]**

### **An alternative view of validity**

The three principles are derived from observation of actual research practice, as a product of making sense of how researchers are able to do what they do. They require that researchers must *submit* themselves to what they see and hear, by consciously and strategically being aware of and managing their own prejudices about how things are. Submission allows realities which are beyond the initial vision of the researcher to *emerge*; and an essential measure of valid qualitative research is that something has been done to enable the unexpected. Researchers are able to assess the validity of their findings by setting them against their own unprejudiced *personal knowledge* of the broad nature of social life.

The implication here is that the rules for validity are realised very differently to the way they would be in a postpositivist paradigm. They share a common underlying aim - to make the research disciplined and hence scientific; but the purpose with postmodern qualitative research is different. Whereas in postpositivist research the aim is to control variables in an attempt to reduce the impact of the researcher, in postmodern qualitative research the aim is to seek the proliferation and richness of variables, to acknowledge and capitalise on the impact of the researcher, and to have no fear of travelling to the hidden depths and mysterious complexities of reality. This is particularly relevant where the aim is to reveal hidden and counter cultures and to demonstrate that things are different to what we thought they were. I use the term 'scientific' here broadly. Qualitative research *is* scientific, but in a different way, in that meaning is pursued in a *disciplined* manner which is *accountable* - an accountability through showing the workings (Holliday 2007). Clifford Geertz, in *The Interpretation of Culture*, states that 'what makes a study convincing ... is whether it sorts winks from twitches and real winks from mimicked ones' (1993: 16). He demonstrates this in his (1993: 6) account of Ryle's analysis of two boys standing in a square, both moving the lid on one eye rapidly. To find out whether each one is **[page 12 ends here]** winking or twitching it is necessary to go outside the core of the instance and investigate what is going on amongst a group of boys standing some distance away. It then emerges that one boy is twitching and that the other is winking in parody of the other one to entertain the wider group. There is thus a persistent pursuance of evidence as the researcher strives to get to the bottom of things.

### **Examples from the field**

While it is important to acknowledge that qualitative research is an interdisciplinary activity, my examples are mainly educational because this is my experience. What I say about them is however informed by a wider range of secondary experience from health, sport science, business, women's studies and so on (Holliday 2007).

### Example 1: Egyptian girls' school

My first example is from Herrera's (1992) use of thick description in her study of a girls' secondary school in Cairo. One of the themes which she selects as significant from her six-month ethnographic immersion in the culture of the school is the headmistress, her 'life, attitudes, struggles, relationships, confrontations, aspirations'. She constructs her interpretation of this by juxtaposing a broad range of instances represented by a series of data types: a description of her dealing with a pupil, a description of what happens when she enters a class, a description of her role in the school, a description of her office and its artefacts, her account of her mission in the school, a student's account of her effect on timekeeping, and a clause in the role of the headmistress in a ministry document. This leads to an effective thick description (Holliday 2007: 74).

However, on what basis can it be established that what Herrera claims is not just a product of her own imagination, which has led her to select what suits her, and to read into it what she wishes in her analysis? I will now leave this example [page 13 ends here] pending, and use the following examples to help me answer this question. I will then return to Herrera's study at the end of the chapter to reassess it in the light of what I have learnt.

### Example 2: Chinese high school students

Duan (2007), in his study of the impact of the Chinese national university entrance exam on final year high school students, had several choices about how to proceed in data collection and analysis. Figure 1 lists two of these choices. I refer to the one on the left as *standard* because it is a common formulation I have seen in a large number of research papers and student dissertations. It is however very unsatisfactory because it is too researcher-led and leaves no room for the unexpected. The questions are generated by the researcher's first ideas about what to look for, the investigation is generated directly by the questions, and the outcome is a set of answers generated directly by both of these. Duan chose the second option, which I feel is more appropriate because it represents a creative *exploration*, not only of the field of study, but also of the way in which the methodology might best develop.

**Figure 1: Methodological choices**

<b>Standard</b>	<b>Exploratory</b>
1. Observe classes, interviewing students and teachers, within a school case study	a. Visit an unfamiliar UK school to practice observation skills, and acquire the discipline of making the familiar strange
2. Devise interview questions ... and observation checklists	b. Notice the complexity of the school, its hidden discourses, and 'strange' student behaviour
3. Ask the questions. Tick the boxes	c. Carry out informal conversations with recent Chinese school leavers
4. Record the answers	d. Discover the emergent, creative, exploratory nature of conversations
	e. Learn to submit himself to what he found along the way until the unexpected begins to emerge

**[page 14 ends here]** His visit to the UK primary school (Figure 1, a) was a training task which I set him for the purpose of sharpening his eye for seeing the unexpected. It was the school which his daughter was attending during his study period in the UK, which gave him an introduction to the setting. He observed a number of classes; and because they were unfamiliar, he noticed the deeper workings of the politics and discourses of the classroom. This would enable him, later, to see some of the realities of the more familiar school in China that he had not hitherto noticed. The gaze of 'the stranger' is an essential dimension of good research (Schutz 1964). His initial interactions with subjects thus also became more cautious and exploratory as he continued to find and develop his interview approach. Referring to 'conversations' instead of 'interviews' in itself comprised a problematising of the norm - a problematising of the researcher thinking-as-usual, which must be interrogated if the thinking-as-usual of the field and the subjects is to be interrogated.

### *Discovering the unexpected*

There are important ethnographic rules here, which connect with the disciplines of submission and emergence - that one cannot proceed as planned until one works out how to present oneself as a researcher, and that one cannot decide what to do next until one has entered the field and begun to come to terms with it. Researchers must *submit* themselves to the nature of the place and then and discover more than they imagined about their subjects. An example of this is where Herrera (op cit) discovered after some time in the field that teachers in the school would not allow her into their classes until they established that she was not just an American student, but also a mother and a wife. Shamim (1996) similarly found that what was most meaningful to teachers in her study of a secondary school in Pakistan was that she was the daughter of a friend of one of the teachers who needed help with completing her university assignment. In my own (Holliday 1991) doctoral study of university classrooms in Egypt, I found that I was not allowed to sit unobtrusively at the back of **[page 15 ends here]** classrooms because the lecturers needed to treat me as a guest and have me sit at the front. In each of these cases it was what was revealed in researcher-subject relations that contributed to a deeper understanding of the nature of the culture in question.

It was certainly became clear that ethical researcher behaviour, such as 'coming clean' or inviting 'collaboration', which are established in, for example, British educational settings, may not apply elsewhere, and are in themselves ethnocentric practices (Holliday 2007: 149). Shamim (op cit) therefore finds that the teachers in her study are not prepared to 'collaborate' by checking through her classroom transcripts: they have more important things to do. An important implication of this is that researchers need to appreciate that what they have brought to the research setting is a way of thinking and talking about research - a researcher discourse - which may need to be seriously questioned if what may be a competing way of thinking and behaving within the research setting is to be taken seriously (Holliday 2007: 140).

Another interesting example of arriving at the unexpected is Honarbin-Holliday's (2005) discovery that the taxi drivers, who took her back and forth to her research site at two university art departments in Tehran, while carrying out a study of art education, had a great deal of relevance to say to her. Their contribution provided her with an essential

external dimension from which to see the issues in her study with fresh eyes (Holliday 2007: 38).

*Appreciating complexities*

Returning to example 2, Duan began to think differently after his experience in the UK school and his conversations with Chinese in the UK. He made an early strategic decision to begin by looking widely before focusing in on the research site in his quest of submission (Figure 1, e). He had to travel from the UK to China before arriving at the site of a secondary school in Wuhan. However, he began looking around for instances of social life that were relevant to his study on arrival in China - at [page 16 ends here] the airport, on the train, in his sister's house where he stopped over on the way - taking note of conversations, observations and chance encounters. He felt that if the national university entrance examination had the sort of impact he suspected, then there would be evidence of this everywhere. He finally approached the students in his research setting via the sorts of conversations he had practiced while in the UK. In so doing he discovered 'private sites' in the diaries and personal stories they began to reveal to him. It was through this exploratory process that he arrived at an *emerging thesis*, which I have summarised on the left of Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Chinese student discourses**

<p><b>Take 1: Emerging thesis</b></p> <p>There is a counter-discourse amongst students which is in conflict with a dominant discourse generated by parents, teachers and the media; and they do not wish to conform to the dominant 'examination' discourse. The students thus oppose the dominant idea that they are totally ruled by the examination process.</p>	<p><b>Take 2: Further emerging thesis</b></p> <p>The student counter discourses contains within it elements of dominant discourse of parents within a yin-yang relationship.</p>
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Perhaps the best evidence that a researcher is sufficiently submitting to the emergent issues of the field is that ideas begin to move. This was certainly the case in Duan's study - even from the point of finding the unexpected in his first phase of conversational interviews. He moved significantly from the initial emergent thesis to a *further emerging thesis*, which I summarise on the right of Figure 2. This further stage emerged because Duan did not rest with his initial phase of data collection, but returned to the site a year later to ask the students again. This persistent and continued effort to get to the bottom of things is a further measure of engaged and rigorous qualitative research.

I have expressed the two theses in the figure in terms of two *takes* on the same set of phenomena. It is important to note, [page 17 ends here] however, that Take 2 does not necessarily negate Take 1: it can result in a more *complex* picture in which different takes represent different facets within an overall sense of greater complexity. Duan's initial thesis may therefore be possible some of the time within the scope of his second thesis. This fits well with the notion of yin and yang, which Duan describes as complementary opposites (2007: 247). This therefore represents a subtle movement away from the positivist desire to tie things down, and towards opening things up by achieving the greater richness necessary for thick description. In its complexity, his second emerging thesis possesses a

verisimilitude - the convincing appearance of being true - because it adds to and incorporates his first. Discovering that the two discourses were present in each other made sense to the researcher because he had *personal knowledge* of this complexity in his own life. When thinking deeply, not as researchers, and about things not close to us, I believe that we actually know that things are very often far more complex than they initially seem. We are all able to assess what makes sense as long as we think in a disciplined way - and know our prejudices.

### *Detail and restraint*

The persistent submission to the complexity of the data can also be seen in the way Duan addresses the detail of his data - and how it interconnects - which represents the ambivalence of real life. This can be seen in the following example from his discussion of data, where we see an extract from a student diary followed by Duan's analysis:

I felt that Teacher Liang was a good teacher. The reasons for her to hit us or scold us were to nurture and educate us - to enable us to become useful, successful people. She did everything for our own good (Diary 3.2, Bao Ling, 07/03/02)!

This Teacher Liang is the same one that scolded Bao Ling in the first extract. It seemed that Bao Ling had already changed his view regarding this teacher. In the incident above, Bao Ling seemed to **[page 18 ends here]** dislike the teacher. But in this extract, it seems that he tries to find some justification for his teacher's ill treatment of him, even defending his teacher for what she had done to him, showing his understanding of her having scolding him. This does not necessarily mean that he has changed his view. It may indicate consistently ambivalent feelings towards her. On the one hand, he hated his teacher for scolding him in public. On the other hand, he showed consent in witnessing his teacher's recital of the discourse. This may suggest that there might be traces or revelation or evidence of the dominant discourse within the students' discourse (Duan, 2007: 156-157)

In this discussion Duan first of all exercises restraint from jumping too quickly into an interpretation. He sets the extract from the diary against another 'incident above' and uses this juxtaposition to move gradually from one possible interpretation to another.

The same complexity and ambivalence can be seen in this detailed description, from Herrera's dissertation, of the headmistress at work, dealing with students in one of her classes:

Almost before she finished her sentence another student approached the desk, leaned forward placing her elbow at the edge of it, and with cast down eyes began to speak. The Headmistress screamed abruptly 'Stand up straight!! Now keep your arms at your sides!' The girl, flushed, continued to speak. (Herrera 1992: 8)

As with Duan’s diary extract, this small description cannot stand alone. Making sense of it depends on a complex set of relationships with other instances within the broader thick description. Nevertheless, even *within* this small piece of description, Herrera takes the time and care to immerse herself in the complexity of what is going on, almost as though she is allowing her own description of it to take on a life of its own. This is evident in the detailed noticing and recording of the student’s posture and positioning of her eyes. The possible interpretation of what is going on in this event is not clear. The headmistress, from her scream, might simply be an authoritarian [page 19 ends here] bully. On the other hand, the fact that the student dares put her elbow on her desk might indicate a tacit sensitivity and intimacy. Herrera goes for the latter, but only because of how this single instance collects with others.

*Force of circumstance, writing, and resisting naïvety*

Once the researcher looks further and wider than the most obvious evidence and becomes open to greater complexity and richness, relevance can be found in the force of unexpected circumstance. Two incidental events made this very apparent to me. The first took place when I was attending a conference on qualitative research at Karachi University. Two takes on the same event are expressed in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: The seat**

<b>Take 1: Self and Other</b>	<b>Take 2: People, politics and society</b>
<p>While standing outside one of the buildings of Karachi University a group of three young women students attending the same conference came up to me and asked questions about my presentation. I wanted to consult them about the dress codes of other young women students I had been watching while sitting on an empty seat in the central part of the university concourse. I asked them to come with me and sit in the same place so that I could show them. They agreed to come with me, but not to sit next to me on the still empty seat, where there was plenty of room for four people.</p> <p>My first take on this was that it was perhaps something to do with gender, age, cultural misunderstanding connected with ‘a Muslim society’.</p>	<p>Later on I was walking in the same area with an older male lecturer from the same university. When I told him what had happened he explained that the seat I had chosen was usually occupied by students from a particular political party and that the students I had invited to sit there would not do so because they didn’t want to be associated with the party. This explained why the seat was empty in the first place, even though the concourse was otherwise crowded with people. There was no-one from that particular political party around and no-one else would sit there. (I had presumed that when I had initially sat there no-one else had taken up the space next to me because they didn’t want to sit with a foreigner.)</p>

[page 20 ends here] Of course the second take on why the women students would not sit down with me is not necessarily more accurate than Take 1. It is not necessarily the case that the university lecturer who suggested this to me should know any better just because he was a lecturer at the same university. It would be too simplistic for me to presume that he knows better just because he is some sort of ‘insider’. Culture is more complex than that. Just because I am a lecturer there does not mean that I understand what is going on between students on my university campus. Also, once again, Take 2 does not necessarily negate Take 1. As with Duan’s two theses (Figure 2), both could be

true at the same time. The political group factor may not have been sufficient in itself to deter the students from sitting on the seat with me, whose foreign presence may have been sufficient to have overridden it. Just because the political factor may have been ascendant at a particular time does not mean that it would continue to be so.

One reason for doubting the accuracy of Take 2 is that it is certainly the case that I was drawn to it simply because it did provide *an* explanation, which was more reassuring than my general confusion in Take 1. On the other hand, I cannot deny that there was an element of an Orientalist exoticising of an 'Eastern', 'Muslim' culture in my perception of cultural difference in Take 1. Against this, the university politics explanation of Take 2 was far less Othering.

Something to note about the discipline of writing in Take 1 is my choice of words, 'came up to me *and* asked'. The act of writing in itself makes me think more carefully about what was going on. I had to restrain myself as far as I could by writing, 'came up to me *to* ask', which would have presumed too much about their purpose which I could not know. Submission to detail can indeed be a significant mechanism whereby a research can acquire the 'stranger' viewpoint. Duan made detailed drawings of the way in which the pupils positioned themselves in his daughter's classroom (Figure 1, a); and he returned to these again and again to gradually unravel what was going on. Grounds (2007), in her study of the nature of [page 21 ends here] sustainability in university self access centres in Mexico, found that describing what she saw in detail enabled her to begin to move into a new viewpoint and to appreciate student behaviour in its own terms instead of in her own professional terms.

**Figure 4: Chinese breakfast**

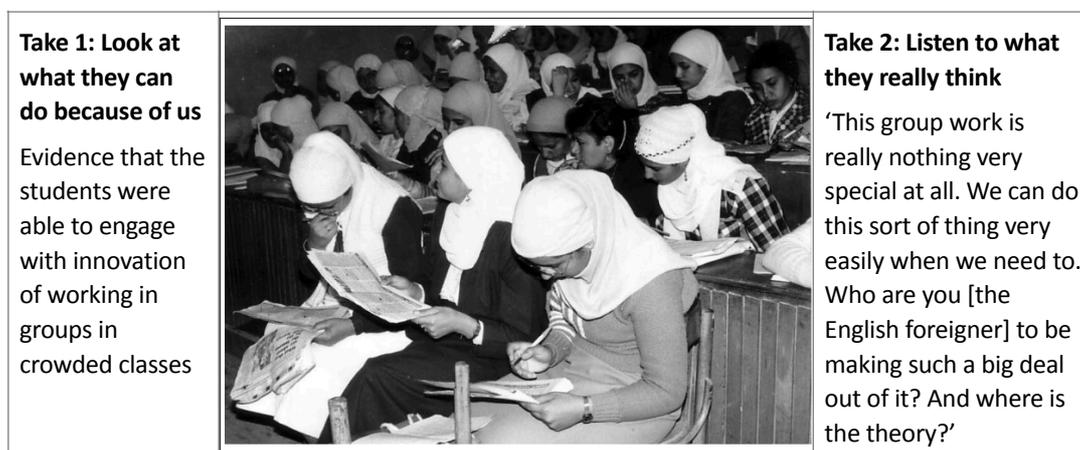
<b>Take 1: Outsider to 'Chinese culture'</b>	<b>Take 2: Outsider behaviour everywhere</b>
<p>When on the first morning I went down for breakfast alone I found myself in a strange environment in which it was difficult for me to know how to proceed. On my right was a table with a large choice of different types of food. On my left was another table with a choice of large and small bowls and plates. I had no idea which type of food to put in or on which. As I hesitated a friendly English speaking Chinese person behind me very quickly told me what to do. On the second morning, after this guidance and after watching other people, I did better, helped myself and sat down to eat.</p>	<p>After a short time I observed two Chinese people approaching the buffet - an older woman and a younger man - and, to my astonishment, they seemed, from the expressions on their faces, their hesitation and body language, to be just as much at a loss for what to do as I had been. Then I remembered how often one needs to enter into some sort of cultural learning when encountering yet another of the multiplicity of types self-service cafés and restaurants one can find in 'native' Britain. It was not 'being Chinese' in 'Chinese culture' which would solve the problem, but just being familiar with a particular procedure.</p>

How naïve one can be about insider knowledge - the Pakistani lecturer just because he was Pakistani - was demonstrated to me in another incident while staying at a university hotel in Nanjing, in the two takes in Figure 4. Again, both takes could represent elements of truth; though what makes Take 2 more believable is its complexity. The second one is based on further evidence, but does not negate Take 1. It simply provides more layers of complexity.

### Example 3: Egyptian university students

My third major example takes the issue of detail and complexity to another plane. It concerns a long-term revisiting of data [page 22 ends here] collected as part of my own doctoral study of the curriculum politics of Egyptian university classrooms (Holliday 1991), and concerns the photograph in Figure 5, which I took in 1988. The power of visual data of this sort is such that it carries a vast amount of cultural insinuation at a glance and can continue to have powerful meaning long after it was collected (Holliday 2007: 66). This was certainly the case with this photograph. I have revisited it many times in my research and teaching to demonstrate a range of points; but it is only in recent years that I have seen something in it which I had ignored at the time when I took it. Take 1 in Figure 5 represents my original use of the image. It was instrumental in supporting my *professional* argument - that Egyptian students were not confined 'simply and passively' (in my terms at the time) to listening to lectures, but could also work more 'actively' (also in my terms) in groups.

**Figure 5: Egyptian students**



[page 23 ends here] I had not really submitted myself to what the students had told me on several occasions, about how they felt about the classroom activities we were asking them to engage in. Even though the purpose of the research was to critique the ethnocentricity of the curriculum project as an 'importer' of Centre language teaching methodologies, I had not gone far enough into problematising the dominant professional discourse. I had noted that Egyptian students and teachers did not lack the ability to master the new methodology and were able to make it their own, thus problematising the need for foreign intervention; but I had not sufficiently critiqued the methodology itself. I had not been able to arrive at the far more undermining notion, expressed in Take 2 in Figure 5, that the students, and indeed the teachers, might have had something far better to do than to engage with the new methodology and its implications.

What I understand much more now than I did then is the power of professional discourses in framing how we see the wider social world. The impact of critical discourse analysis in applied linguistics has been instrumental, in the last fifteen years, largely through the work of Normal Fairclough (e.g. 1995). Hence, doing my PhD at the same time as being an English language curriculum consultant, I was very much preoccupied with a

powerful professional discourse. In Holliday (2005) I trace the manner in which this discourse constructs the picture of a 'non-native speaker' Other who is in need of cultural improvement in order to learn or teach English. I trace the roots of this discourse to the early days of an explicitly behaviouristic classroom method, and show how it has developed within a complex ideology of native-speakerism. my preoccupation was therefore with perceiving the students in the photograph as 'learners' who needed to be helped to adopt new strategies, rather than as people with their own views about education and society. their comments in Take 2 reflect not only their views about what was (in fact not) happening in the classroom, but their views about their relationship with the presence of foreign influence. **[page 24 ends here]**

My understanding of this conflict was heightened by my analysis of one of my own qualitative descriptions of Hong Kong Chinese student classroom behaviour as part of a study of an English immersion programme on in the UK which they were students (Holliday 2005: 31-2, 2007: 177). In Figure 6, Take 1 is the original text of my description; and Take 2 is my later realisation of the ideology underpinning my writing of it. What I feel is important about this is that my later, reflexive, excavation (Take 2) of what I was doing in the field of study (Take 1), actually comprises the more important finding.

**Figure 6: Hong Kong Chinese students**

<b>Take 1: 'Childlike learners'</b>	<b>Take 2: Chauvinistic researcher</b>
<p>I was determined to get them into choosing topics for projects by the end of the morning. ... The students arrived in dribs and drabs late. They arranged themselves around the cluster of tables fairly haphazardly. Some of them were beginning to turn on computers and I told them not to, to sit straight down - fearing that they were going to get onto their chat-lines. (I had got the impression previously that they spent every moment of 'free' time on chat lines.) .... Then I left them for 30 minutes to devise ideas for projects. ... When I returned they were remarkably on task. Some of them perkily looked round to say they were 'on-time'.</p>	<p>It may be difficult for the reader to see the traces of culturism here. I can because when I see what I wrote, it enables me to excavate the pre-occupations with a (to me) Other and unsatisfactory Chinese culture, which were there, but too deep for me to notice, at the time of writing. 'To get them' implies a superior teacher trying to change culturally 'inferior' behaviour of the object other 'them' (rather than 'us'). 'Dribs and drabs', 'fairly haphazardly' and 'they ... chat-lines' implies confirmation of this expected behaviour. 'Arranged themselves' implies a sense of degenerate self-indulgence - nothing better to do than to 'display' themselves 'ornament-ally'. 'Get them ... by ...' also reveals the objectives-led control element of a so-called 'student-led' pedagogy within which students are in reality operatives to be 'improved' by a controlled treatment. Hence, I found it 'remarkable', on returning to the class after leaving to get something, to find that 'they' were actually doing the things I had set them - whereas there was no reason at all why they should not. Nevertheless, I still refer to them as being 'perky' - like 'children' rather than adult people.</p>

**[page 25 ends here]** In both of these cases from my own research, Take 2 is the result not of further data within the setting itself, but of increased *personal knowledge* about the nature of professional discourses. Since I wrote my PhD thesis I have acquired a more mature personal knowledge of the politics of my profession; and I was able to apply this knowledge to my writing in Take 1 on the Hong Kong students.

*Example 1 again: Locating the Egyptian girls' school within a sociological imagination*

Returning to Herrera's study of the Egyptian girls' school, in the light of the other examples I have presented, what is it that gives validity to what she says about the headmistress, 'life, attitudes, struggles, relationships, confrontations, aspirations'. While the built up picture of her thick description is essential, what is also important is the distance she moves from the beginning to the end of her research experience. This is represented in the two takes in Figure 7, the first being her statement, at the beginning of her dissertation, about what led her to do the study in the first place, and the second being her final statement. She was drawn to the school by its exoticness; and there are certainly detailed descriptions of 'exotic' behaviour in the body of her dissertation - but it is the persistent working through of these experiences that enables her to come out in a very different place. She did not begin with a determination to find out what was common between a two schools, in Cairo and San Francisco, with questions that she simply found answers for ('How far are the schools similar, in terms of a..., b... and so on') as in the first procedure in Figure 1. She posed the classic, general, ethnographic question, 'What is going on'; but this question is special in that it leaves the route and procedures open. **[page 26 ends here]**

**Figure 7: Moving across worlds**

<b>Take 1: Approaching the strange</b>	<b>Take 2: Appreciating complexity</b>
[a] loudspeaker ... and the military-like responses of girls, drum beats and off-tune accordion blared into my room. ... Irritation turned suddenly to fascination. 'What on earth are they doing over there?' I wondered. 'What are they saying? Who are they? What does it all mean?' ... I wandered into the hall, still in pajamas, and asked an Arab student ... what the ruckus was about. She ... said, emphasizing the obviousness of it 'it's a school'. A school. And yet its sounds were so unfamiliar. (Herrera 1992: 6)	It is Egypt, it is the East, it is also a developing country. But it is also humanity. Beyond my initial fascination with the exotic protocol, drills, sounds and system, it became just an ordinary school. ... I cannot count the times I felt myself transformed over six thousand miles and more than a decade away to the parochial school in downtown San Francisco that I attended as a child. Superficially the two schools are vastly different. ... Yet despite their specific features [one can] ... join them together in the world community of schools. (Herrera 1992: 80-81)

Returning to the question I asked about Herrera's research at the beginning of the chapter - the basis upon which it can be established that what she claims is not just a product of her own imagination - has I think much to do with the distance she has moved from Take 1 to Take 2. This distance indicates that she has applied the disciplines of submission, emergence and personal knowledge within the mechanisms of thick description.

## **Conclusion**

To finish, I would like briefly to revisit the nature of the movement of from Take 1 to Take 2 in the examples cited, and then relate this to the theme of decentred research. In each example a greater sense of validity is achieved because the researcher moves from an initial take on what is going on to a different, less expected position. This process is enabled by the disciplines of submission, emergence and personal knowledge, and by thick

description, whether it be as a result of revisitation, different [page 27 ends here] viewpoints, different events or interventions, a new data collection technique, a new informant, or a mature understanding of the nature of things - a more mature personal knowledge. In each case the second take adds a dimension of complexity which does not necessarily negate the first take, but which certainly places it within a greater perspective of understanding.

The relationship between this ability to move into new realms of understanding is on the one hand a necessary ingredient of all good research. Certainly a very basic question to ask of doctoral candidates is 'what have you done to distance yourself from the familiar in such a way that the unexpected can begin to emerge?' On the other hand, decentred research requires this overthrowing of centred understandings and methodologies in perhaps more specific ways. Centred understandings conform to dominant, imagined notions of who people are and what they can do and what they should be allowed to do. In a postcolonial world, these unquestioned understandings have often serviced colonialism by depicting the foreign Other as culturally inadequate. In the examples of first takes in this chapter they include 'Chinese students are unthinkingly dominated by examinations', and 'Egyptian students need to be taught how to work in groups'. Centred methodologies are governed by unquestioned assumptions about the nature of relationships between researchers and their subjects and fail to stand outside professional and researcher discourses. It is not until these centred understandings are overthrown that there is any chance of understanding the Periphery cultural realities that remain obscured by Centre preoccupations.

I feel that an important implication of this is that decentred research is not a matter of *who* the researcher is, but of *how* they position themselves. Research into a Chinese community will not succeed just because the researcher is Chinese. Personal knowledge is not the same as insider knowledge of *what* a particular place or cultural reality is like; it is deeply reflected knowledge of *how* society, everywhere, works. [page 28 ends here]

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