

**Blogs 2013 to 2020**  
**How it is possible to write**  
**Issues with culture**

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## Preface

This collection of blogs, published over seven years, comments on and engages with the topics that have also featured in my other publications: native-speakerism, neo-racist intercultural prejudice, my grammar of culture, blocks and threads, small culture formation on the go, and how it is possible to write.

They have been written for a number of reasons. They have helped me formulate ideas and sort out my thinking, sometimes written quickly to get through writing blocks. They reflect a lot of working out of ideas. The concept of intercultural blocks and threads was first expressed here, as was trying to achieve greater clarity about the nature of culture and speakerhood. They also enabled me to comment there and then on things that I see around me - in classrooms, public spaces, and cafés where I like to write because of the proximity to social life.

They have provided the freedom from the clutter of academic referencing conventions which has in turn influenced my more 'formal' writing. The non-academic style does not mean though that the blogs are anecdotal. They are written with the same care about how statements and claims can be made. Without reference to research literature to hide behind, there is greater caution about how to write convincingly. I have developed the conviction that if I cannot express ideas in this uncluttered form, they are not going to make sense anywhere else. There *are* occasional references where this was unavoidable, as is the case in this preface. Perhaps the rule should be to refer to others only when it's a necessary way of showing a bigger picture. I find it a healthy task to find ways, without referencing, to say something potentially controversial without being shoutingly polemic. Indeed, working out how to do this helps me understand that referencing other people's research and views does not in itself make writing convincing. While some blogs were written very quickly, others took months to get right.

There are two themes - 'Issues with culture' and 'How it is possible to write'. The first deals with the substantive issues of native-speakerism and the intercultural. The second is the name of an article I published in 2005 which also informed the preface of my book of the same date<sup>1</sup>. This was in response to the question I had been asked about how I, as a privileged White, Western, male, could write about inequality, prejudice and neo-racism related to the intercultural and speakerhood. My response was that I have lived and indeed

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<sup>1</sup> 'How is it possible to write?' *Journal of Language, Identity & Education* 4/4, 2005. The struggle to teach English as an international language, Oxford University Press, 2005.

helped, without being aware, to construct the Centre discourses of prejudice from the inside and know how they operate. I am not being so presumptuous as to speak for the oppressed, but instead to speak to people like myself, and to anyone who has power over discourses, about how much better we can do. 'How it is possible to write' therefore underpins the 'Issues with culture' theme. Being potentially complicit in the prejudices of speakerhood and the intercultural requires very special care when writing and also when dealing with the inevitably subjective qualitative methodology behind the writing.

As acknowledgement, I would like to give special thanks to Sara Amadasi, my co-researcher over much of the time of these blogs, who has been my major conversant and contributor to ideas, and to Mariam Attia, who introduced me to Wordpress and inspired me to blog from the beginning.

## **Brief index of concepts:**

- Grammar of culture - blogs 5, 18, 21, 31, 48, 49, 51, 52, 66, 77
- Small cultures - blogs 12, 51, 52, 53, 54, 78
- Small culture formation on the go - blogs 58, 59, 66, 67, 70, 73, 78,
- Blocks and threads - blogs 40, 41, 42, 45, 47, 48, 50, 73, 75, 78
- Native-Speakerism - blogs 13, 33, 34, 63, 64
- Intercultural competence - blogs 13, 18
- Reconstructed ethnographic narratives - blogs 12, 23, 28, 35, 62, 66,
- Grand and personal narratives - blogs 38, 49, 50, 51, 53, 58, 67, 73, 74, 75, 78
- Interculturality - blogs 18, 48, 62, 66
- Third space - blogs 66, 73
- Hybridity - blogs 62, 66, 78

## Contents

[1] Major decisions	7
[2] Blogging and refining	7
[3] Risking pushing boundaries	7
[4] Writing to learn	8
[5] How to present your material	8
[6] Perhaps getting nowhere	9
[7] Submitting to discipline	9
[8] Can we teach critical thinking?	9
[9] Another block	10
[10] And then ... in simple terms	11
[11] Easy questions and easy answers	11
[12] Talking about culture	12
[13] The dangers of a soft cultural difference approach	13
[14] The problem with stereotypes	14
[15] 'What shall we say to preserve our dignity?'	15
[16] Accepting statements	16
[17] Why I shouldn't be surprised; and why I sit down	16
[18] What is intercultural competence?	17
[19] Planning ahead	18
[20] Planning a presentation	19
[21] Finding a new voice	19
[22] Submitting	20
[23] Working with narratives	21
[24] Stuck in reflection	22
[25] Blogging does help ... and cafés and music	23
[26] Small steps, abstracts and positioning	23
[27] Every minute counts	24
[28] Making ethnographic narratives	24
[29] No evidence	24

[30] What I must always do and not do	25
[31] Themes, technology, bits of text, and multiple sites	26
[32] Conference presentations that never really get there	27
[33] Stepping out of the convenient	27
[34] What is behind native-non-native-speaker labelling?	28
[35] So what is culture?	30
[36] Moving on	31
[37] What to do about multiple identity constructions	31
[38] Reading good fiction	32
[39] The issue of values	32
[40] Talking about cultural difference - blocks and threads	33
[41] Moving between blocks and threads - sharing humanity	35
[42] Engaging with foreign places	36
[43] The pleasure of writing - shortening and refining	37
[44] Final submission	37
[45] Returning to recent writing	38
[46] Getting a new storyline	38
[47] Positioning and characterisation	39
[48] Blocking threads and threading blocks	39
[49] What to say about nation	41
[50] Narratives as dark matter	42
[51] What is it possible to say and think about culture?	44
[52] About boundaries of cultures	46
[53] So what do we mean by intercultural?	49
[54] Researching with others - slices and segments	50
[55] Stepping outside the literal	51
[56] Writing out of sense-making	52
[57] The final forming	52
[58] Writing new thinking	53
[59] Multiple locations for research	53
[60] The value of painful review	55
[61] 'In my mind's eye'	56

[62] The location of argument and the connecting of sentences	57
[63] Why we should stop using native-non-native speaker labels	58
[64] Reference to native-non-native speaker labels in research	61
[65] Being focused	62
[66] Achieving interculturality	63
[67] Cultural rhythms	64
[68] The man in the café	67
[69] New storyline, more ideas and new findings	68
[70] A methodology for getting to the final text:	70
[71] Getting the data chapters written	72
[72] How to write about data	73
[73] Explaining things	75
[74] 'Your English is so good'	77
[75] Café Náderi	77
[76] Putting theory in its place	79
[77] Getting the beginning right:	80
[78] Small culture shock	81

## Blogs

### [1] Major decisions

How it is possible to write 8/13

At some point in writing one comes to the decision about whether to continue or just scrap the whole thing. I am writing a short article for a highly competitive journal. The editor has been helpful with the reviewers' comments and made his own suggestions about the changes I should make. This seems positive; and so I begin. But then the whole thing begins to change, and I begin to wonder if I really want to get into all this.

### [2] Blogging and refining

How it is possible to write 8/13

The process of writing this blog in itself helps me to clear my head about my writing. I go back to the text, mindful of how struggling to meet the comments of reviewers leads to re-framing, cutting out even more of the dead wood and refining connections between ideas. But I still wonder why reviewers keep saying that readers cannot cope with difficult concepts, especially as I find some of the concepts difficult in articles which are published.

### [3] Risking pushing boundaries

How it is possible to write 8/13

I am interested in a recent comment that it may be 'a little more difficult to resculpt a paper after review once you have done many'. I think this is very true if you are trying to push the boundaries. I am personally very confident that it is entirely possible for writers to bring change to established norms about what is publishable, especially with regard to research methodology and what counts as empirical evidence.

However, on the other side, reviewers, like the majority of academics who support the norm, can require a huge amount of conformity. This may seem like a conflict; but I think it is in effect the checks and balances that ensure the highest quality. I also believe that we can never just let anything go.

The risks for the adventurous writer are nevertheless considerable. There is the definite possibility of failure, and the loss of personal face which comes with that. And also having to bear the reviews which imply you are a novice in

an establishment which you are trying to leave behind. Also, just not getting published at all.

Which reminds me - I have two reviews to write, which I am a couple of days late for! And I'm afraid to say that I will be quite harsh with writers who adhere to methodologies and ideas which I no longer approve of - not because I simply don't like them, but because I think they are no longer valid.

#### [4] Writing to learn

How it is possible to write 8/13

After recommending reject for an article I have reviewed for another journal, I consider again whether I should continue with the one I am writing. I see even more clearly why it might just be too far from what the journal in question can accept. But my reasons for continuing are elsewhere. There is still much for me to learn from the process, not just about writing, but also about the subject matter itself. In trying to push and squeeze my thoughts into another format, I have already developed my thinking. It is amazing that I am still working out exactly what it is that I am trying to say - struggling with the logic and with what actually can be said.

#### [5] How to present your material

How it is possible to write 8/13

As I continue to draft and re-draft my changes to suit the reviewers I eventually find alternative ways to present my material. The core is my grammar of culture. It is purposefully complex because the reality is not simple; so to find a way to present it simply - having being warned that the readers 'will not understand' - I have to find some ingenious way. I have to think of oral presentations when I seem to have been fairly successful in talking about the diagram display in a few words. But in the writing there can be no body language to indicate the essence of the grammar.

Then there is the temptation to fundamentally change the diagram. But this is not possible because I want to maintain the link to the original, which I want to keep as the core reference for anyone who wishes to look. But anyway in this process I am still learning about how the grammar works - or about how the relationships which the diagram tries to represent works.



## [6] Perhaps getting nowhere

How it is possible to write 8/13

The more I reduce the text, the closer I get to seeing the bare bones of the argument; and I begin also to see its flaws. Well, they are not actually flaws; but the space isn't there to explain the connections as much as I feel necessary. The danger there would be that I would be criticised for superficiality. There is already a full discussion along the same lines on the internet.

Should I therefore let this go and resign myself to the fact that what I have to say here simply cannot be squeezed into the requirements of this journal? I have cut 500 words since the last posting, out of a total of 3500. And until recently I felt that by cutting and cutting I was getting to the core of the discussion and bringing greater clarity.

I am nevertheless going to put this aside at least for the moment, move onto the next project, and look back at it freshly later.

## [7] Submitting to discipline

How it is possible to write 8/13

I don't want to give the impression that I'm giving up on a piece of writing because I'm not allowed by the journal to write in a way that represents my ideas. Finding it difficult to meet a particular editorial requirement does not mean believing that anything should go. The disciplines that publishers and the academic community impose on us help us to refine our ability to write. This does not mean that we shouldn't resist tradition; but we must master it before we can move against it.

A while ago I had a chapter published in an edited book which did not have a strong reviewing process. I was pleased to get it published quickly; but now I find it embarrassing to read. The style is repetitive and inarticulate. With another case I resubmitted it twice before it was published. I feel I was eventually 'successful' through a process of attrition; and I ended up publishing something which didn't fit what they wanted and had also moved away from what I wanted.

## [8] Can we teach critical thinking?

Issues with culture 9/13

For some time I have resisted the idea that we can teach critical thinking. This is because it has often been associated with intercultural learning - something

that people from non-Western 'cultures' need to master if they are going to do well in the West. Well, I put this down to some form of racism which presumes that a foreign Other somehow can't think as well as 'we' can. For this reason I have promoted the opposing idea that critical thinking is a universal - an essential part of being human rather than an essential part of a particular 'culture'.

There is another way of looking at this - that critical *is* a universal, but something that we *all* have to learn. It is to do with logic and sorting out ideas. It means distinguishing form from content, the general from the particular, rhetoric and ideology from what they hide, working out the nature of discourses, and just not being satisfied with easy answers.

I have heard about this more technical view of critical thinking before from a number of sources. Indeed, it may be far older than the recent fad for cultural comparison. But I am drawn to it in the frustration of witnessing the hysteria on some (supposedly critical) British news programmes and among some British politicians, as they fall completely for the 'West as steward' discourse in which bombing Syria means 'protecting the Syrian people'.

## [9] Another block

How it is possible to write 9/13

Getting on well now with another article. This time I have actually been invited to write something which is at the centre of what I am interested in. I feel free to do this in my own way with the voice I like - personal and exploring. I started on my iPad, writing freely and developing ideas; but to get the bigger sense of how it looked I had to go to my laptop - and it began to look different. I began with listing points and sub-points to get down the basic ideas and structure of the argument, and then inserting paragraphs in different places. This has enabled me to build sometimes from the inside, and progress has been good. Yesterday, some of the main points became headings and the final shape sprang quickly into being. I even wrote an introduction in fifteen minutes. I only have three weeks. I use the Freedom software to keep me off the internet when I do my early morning stint.

But now, suddenly, a week from the deadline, I hit a block. The very core of what I want to say suddenly seems too difficult to put into words; and the whole fabric seems in danger of perishing. And once again I am stuck in the middle of a paragraph, and might be there for days. Perhaps what I am trying to say, and what I have been maintaining for years, is actually unnecessary, not right at all.

## [10] And then ... in simple terms

How it is possible to write 9/13

And then, as a result of writing this blog, I am sure, suddenly, clarity of thinking springs into place and the paragraph moves on. What makes it work is finding simple things to say it. First it was all about ideology and discourse and how researchers and subjects are all implicated - when talking about language and culture. Saying that was just too difficult. So instead I say that people are just people and have all sorts of views and will say different things at different times ... And so on. The whole thing is about drawing attention to complexity, but managing somehow to do this in simple language.

## [11] Easy questions and easy answers

Issues with culture 9/13

I have been feeling quite frantic the last couple of days. My deadline is the end of tomorrow. I could ask for an extension, though it is never good to do that at the last minute because it is so inconsiderate. I also need the deadline for myself because I very simply need to move on.

So I sit down in all sorts of locations and try to push myself, and find myself indulging in all sorts of distractions. The piece is not very long, and really should be easy; but although another write-through *is* improving the text, there is still something missing. Then, just now, a breakthrough came - a perhaps simple matter of finding a phrase around which to anchor the whole discussion.

I've been asked to write about how to research English and culture. I'm getting into a discussion about modernism and postmodernism; but all the time wondering if this is really the crux of the issue, and even *so what*, and what will people make of it. Then suddenly I find myself writing a sentence which says that it is all about avoiding 'easy questions and easy answers'. And there I have the core. It might even go in the title. I will certainly make an autocorrect shortcut for it.

Isn't prejudice, cultural profiling, using simple and divisive headings of religion, all to do with this issue? If anything is good about all the discussions about Syria, on the media and between politicians, over the last week, it really might just be acknowledging the complexity and getting beyond the easy questions and easy answers - jumping or perhaps just creeping out of entrenched discourses.

## [12] Talking about culture

Issues with culture 10/13

For some time I have been discouraging the use of the word 'culture' in reference to large entities such as nations, continents, religions and so on. I have used the word 'society' simply because at the current time it seems to be less prone to racist over-simplification. There is however the very real issue that everyone does use 'culture' all the time in everyday talk. In my recent book in almost all the narratives the characters do indeed talk about 'culture', while in my commentary and discussion I try not to. I do not want to recommend a censorship of 'culture' of the type that has been applied to 'race'. I think it is true that referring to people's culture has become a soft and allowable way of referring to racist perceptions of difference; but culture is different to race.

Whereas it may be inappropriate to say things about race because it is itself a seriously invalid concept, saying things about culture is not always inappropriate because culture does not have to be an invalid concept. Indeed, talking about institutional, organisational, methodological, educational, political, professional, and generally 'small cultures' is valid because this generally does not involve reducing or Othering the people associated with them. The whole point of the concept of small culture is to apply 'culture' to entities which people move in and out of, regularly change, critique and have complex and multiple memberships of.

At the same time using 'cultural' is valid when it relates to something which belongs to a particular environment of rules, understandings and practices. And, indeed, when such an environment is influenced by educational, communicational, political and economic institutions, and by national histories, it can be as broad as a whole country. But it is still only an environment and does not confine people; and such cultural practices are just ways of doing things which change and come and go and are not harnessed into an essentialist mould.

The aim must therefore be to recover 'culture' from the essentialist way of thinking - from a means whereby we categorise whole nations, regions, religions and so on, and confine people to them. Perhaps we simply must not apply it to these large things at all, unless we are clearly invoking something not scientific or objective, but figurative, poetic inspirational or political, in which case we must always be aware that it is an imaginary and never be taken in.

## [13] The dangers of a soft cultural difference approach

Issues with culture 11/13

So what is the harm of keeping within a this-culture-that-culture way of talking if it really isn't essentialist? In almost every presentation I attended at a recent intercultural communication conference this was the case. There was what might be called a soft approach to cultural difference, which ran as follows.

There was no mention of stereotypes, no Othering, in the sense that no-one seemed to be described or categorised as having a cultural profile which might in any way confine them to a restricted essence. Diversity was fully acknowledged. Perhaps because it was Europeans talking about other Europeans, there was no talk of people from 'other cultures' having any particular difficulty with things like critical thinking, autonomy, decision making, organising, or all the standard deficiencies so often levelled at the so-called non-West. 'Other cultures' seemed to be perceived as having very open characteristics which needed simply to be explored.

The main topic was intercultural English language education, which I think is a good concept. However, within this soft approach, throughout the presentations English was largely perceived as having its own culture, which was implied to be British or American. This didn't however seem to be an obstacle because 'native speaker' English and its culture was accepted as having a comfortable, unthreatening place in the home culture of the 'non-native speakers' who were using it. It was therefore possible for everyone to speak quite comfortably of English as a 'target' language having its own and separate 'target' culture. One presenter spoke about the learning of another culture having extended the learning of language, and that cultural competence had taken over from communicative competence. The 'native-speaker' was referred to easily by everyone, though there was the sense that it wasn't completely a closed and exclusive concept. It was a soft, unthreatening reference to native-speakers; and it was very clear that there wasn't really anything too specific about native-speaker models of English.

Does this mean that the issue of Othering is resolved, because notions of difference between cultures have been softened so much that they have been rendered harmless? As long as it is accepted that every culture is diverse and just 'different' rather than deficient, has the problem of essentialism been solved? Is it just not true that, as Stuart Hall has claimed, mention of 'culture' is always political and divisive? And has the question of the ownership of English as a world language also been solved - with a recognition that English does

belong to its 'Western' native speakers, but that everyone has access to it, and it can harmlessly enrich everyone's culture?

This soft approach may look as though it resolves all the issues. It enables researchers in their literature reviews to speak cautiously but well of all the old essentialist literature by saying that its apparently harsh Othering does not have be so harsh after all. It also allows students, and parents of students, and textbook writers and teachers to continue to want or teach their favourite British or American culture as though it is a real thing rather than an attractive icon or brand.

No, I think that issues of cultural difference, English and culture are *not* resolved. This soft approach avoids the more complex truths - that while we do have different cultural backgrounds, cultures are not exclusively distinct, and that English no longer has a Western native-speaker ideal. It ignores the fact that, rather than English inhabiting foreign cultures harmlessly, we can all inhabit English with our own cultural realities. There is no line between cultures which limits us to understanding and being tolerant of other people's values. Believing in this cultural line invokes a dangerous view that 'their' values are different to 'ours' or the same as 'ours' in the sense of 'with us or against us'. This false line creates caste-like divisions between different imagined cultures. If they have values that we can only tolerate and can never be part of or contribute to, there is a dormant potential for conflict and war.

## [14] The problem with stereotypes

Issues with culture 12/13

Some people think that cultural stereotypes are a good thing because they are a useful starting point - that they are beginning theories which can then be disproved when exceptions are observed - that this process is a natural and indeed scientific process for understanding.

It is certainly true that science uses theories to help us to understand complex realities. However, cultural stereotypes are not the sorts of theories that can be easily disproved. They group people under solid headings which will always depict them as less than who they actually are. These headings are also so seductive that it is impossible to escape from them. In the great complexity of things it will always be possible to find examples of them - to support the illusion that they might be true.

Stereotypes are indeed natural. We all carry them with us wherever we go. But we carry them in the same way that we carry race and gender stereotypes. They are always there; and we need everyday to push them aside. Nobody

nowadays would suggest that we need race and gender stereotypes to help us understand.

I agree with my colleague, Fred Dervin, that the only thing worth discussing about stereotypes is not how far they are accurate, but why people need to make them.

Gender stereotypes follow all of us throughout our lives, there is always a 'reason' that someone is the way they are and what that means to others and the impact it'll have on relationships, friendships, etc. However, stereotypes aren't fair, and there are other ways of looking at them, for instance, the term 'beta male' has been used to describe a man who is unsocial and introverted. Those are only a few of the labels, but in reality that is not always the case.

## [15] 'What shall we say to preserve our dignity?'

Issues with culture 12/13

Conversation between two 'international' students:

A: What shall we do about what people think about us? We're getting a bad reputation that we come from a culture which doesn't allow us to think for ourselves.

B: Yes, they keep saying 'hierarchical and authoritarian'.

A: Well, it might be; but it doesn't mean we can't think for ourselves.

B: Don't they see their own hierarchies?

A: They want us to talk in class; but what the home students say isn't exactly critical.

B: Well we can't get a word in. It's true we're not used to speaking in class without preparing.

A: And then when you do they think you've learnt it from them.

B: Getting assimilated like with the Borg.

A: Being 'Westernised'. Congratulating you because you've become like them.

B: All they do is measure us by this image that they've designed for us.

A: We don't have a chance of being understood for who we are; but we need some space to get them off our backs.

B: So let's play the stereotype they've made for us back to them.

A: Yes, let's really package this 'culture' thing and make it so special and sacred that we can't be touched.

A: A bit like wearing some sort of impregnable suit.

B: Well we wouldn't be the first.

A: Yes, they wouldn't ask us too much about it because they don't expect that we have personal opinions - that we'd all say the same things anyway.

B: Of course the problem is that we might start to believe it too.

## [16] Accepting statements

Issues with culture 2/14

When I refer to *underlying universal cultural processes* I am talking about how we are all equipped to play with culture wherever we go. Sometimes we can make big statements about 'our culture' and how we are different to everyone else. Sometimes our politicians or advertisers do this for us and we resist by insisting we do not at all conform to the definitions they place on us. When pushed we say that 'in our culture' we are always on time; but then we can choose not to be when it suits. When we are faced by the foreign we can close ranks and exaggerate like mad.

However, how often do we think that all this only applies to 'us'? When others tell us that 'in their culture ...' do we just take it at face value because we don't believe that 'they' are complex like 'us'? Do we believe that unlike us 'they' are all the same? Or do we just want them to be exotic - all the same in some idealised or demonised unchanged state? Do we want to construct some idealised or demonised state for them which we can protect or make war on in our diversity?

Do 'they' realise that we are idealising or demonising from their statements to suit our own agendas? In fact they are probably playing the same games with us but we don't see it because we don't think they can.

## [17] Why I shouldn't be surprised; and why I sit down

Issues with culture 2/14

Why should I be surprised that I was able to carry out a seminar in Cairo with school teachers which involved a deep discussion of the relationship between culture and English and its underlying politics?

They were a group of about 30; and from the very outset they engaged fully with the discussion and contributed ideas that helped me sort out my own. It was my own cultural prejudice that initially allowed me to be influenced by colleagues and the whole orientation of our profession to believe that teachers don't relate to or even understand theory.



We sat down together - looked at bits of text and images, considered critical statements, evaluated concepts, reconsidered established professional principles, and moved to new understandings.

'We sat down together' is such an important part of this. These days I have to ask beforehand for a table so that I can sit down. The expectation is so much that presenters must stand and walk about, and point at the PowerPoint slides as though they are a whiteboard. It is all so teacherly.

So I got my table and when everyone arrived I asked them to shuffle their chairs so that we almost sat around the table - and it was more like a meeting. We shared such a lot.

Sitting or standing changes the whole politics of the setting. Are we there to listen and be taught - so that even when we are asked to speak it is part of being trained? Or are we there to share ideas and work things out - to hear what someone thinks - and to work out what we think about it?

Someone might think that a seminar or workshop on culture and English and its politics is inappropriate for teachers because it isn't about practical suggestions for how to teach. I disagree. Ideas that stand behind practice are also important. This is especially the case when resources are limited or unchangeable.

The same textbooks, activities, topics, language items, class sizes, furniture and so on may take on new and very different life if teachers have different attitudes about the intelligence of their students - and have been invited to share ideas about the politics. *How we should think* about our students and ourselves will have a huge impact on how we are in the classroom. We aren't always able to change what we actually do because of resources and institutional pressures - but even with all of this we can change how we treat our students

## [18] What is intercultural competence?

Issues with culture 2/14

I'm not inspired by the notion of intercultural competence if it is anything to do with one 'culture' learning to interact with or be tolerant of another 'culture'. If the critical approach is that the culture in question isn't as narrow as we thought it was, I don't think that goes anywhere near far enough. I'm more interested in how we can all carry our own backgrounds into and then find ourselves in other cultural domains, whatever they may be. It is not then cultures that are the issue, but how we construct the whole idea of culture.

If a culture is any more than just a construct, it's a network of institutions and policies, from family through education to the government. The people are just people; but histories bring all these things together and forge common behaviours, which can indeed be described and are very often different in different places.

But the essence of the institutions, policies, histories and people, and the way they all come together, are common in their processes everywhere. This is what I mean by underlying universal cultural processes, which are in the very centre of my grammar.

It is understanding this commonality and making use of it which is the basic material for bringing people together. It is not therefore tolerance of the particularities of the Other and being critically conscious of the particularities of the Self that we should be focusing on, but how underlying universal cultural processes are and can be used. This is at the core of interculturality.

The research I would like to do is to see how these underlying universal cultural processes act themselves out when people come together. And in terms of education, to help people to understand and use them. The big big problem is that everyone is so wired with thinking about the particularities - which is the product of successful socialisation - all the stuff on the right of my grammar - that it is very hard for people to talk about these underlying universal cultural processes.

## [19] Planning ahead

How it is possible to write 3/14

I have found it increasingly hard to get writing done recently. This is probably because I'm writing shorter pieces. The same goes for a proliferation of conference and seminar presentations. I spend many anxious hours trying to get ideas in the right order and to communicate something clear to the audience in question. What I want to say is not an easy matter, and so often departs significantly from the dominant discourse.

What I am therefore doing is taking more time planning. Oral presentations without PowerPoint are much easier - just a series of points that I can talk to. So I am using this device - bullet-pointed short statements, with indents to two or three levels, which I can move around. And before bothering with slides and images.

## [20] Planning a presentation

How it is possible to write 4/14

Following my last blog about using bullet pointed notes to plan presentations and papers, it's helpful to think of this as writing a storyboard - saying what sorts of images and text should go into the PowerPoint slides, making you think about the best images and text images to convey ideas in a very brief time.

Well at the end of this advice to self, I still ended up making changes this morning between having breakfast and going out to actually do the presentation - after having sent the final version last night - so all the palaver again of putting a copy on two memory sticks, and making sure that each one worked, and that it *was* the new version.

I now find that once I have the PowerPoint finalised, the best thing is to print it out, six slides to a page, and then make notes on the printout to remind me what to say. It was the process of doing this at breakfast that made me realise that something was missing. So for this reason I had to change the PowerPoint again. This required taking an image from a previous PowerPoint but then editing it, removing an arrow and moving another arrow into another position, shortening it and putting new text in. Because I now had certainty it took about 15 minutes. Then ... I wasn't going to print it out again, so I wrote onto the original printout where the changes had been made.

## [21] Finding a new voice

How it is possible to write 4/14

Feeling good. Yesterday morning I wrote an email to the editor regarding a book chapter I'm writing, to say I had to withdraw. I'd been struggling through three different formats for the chapter for over a month and got nowhere. I'd already asked for a two week extension. All my bullets and planning had come to nothing.

I didn't send the email. I thought at the last moment that a chapter on researching culture was really an opportunity not to be given up. Then a new idea emerged. I'd been spending too much time on critiquing how it should not be done, getting literally bogged down in all sorts of old arguments that were taking me nowhere new. Now I realise that this has been completely the wrong starting place. I have a workable picture of culture through my grammar which provides a ready framework for suggesting research ideas and methodology - starting from the beginning to say what can be done and how.

So I have started all over again from the beginning. I've discarded all the clutter of the old notes. My new ploy is to build my ideas gradually through plain sentences, and doing something that always works for me - writing about an object, a piece of data, a diagram, an image, and, in this case, the grammar itself. My mind has cleared; and I've recovered the practice of writing at least something every morning immediately after getting up or just before going out. There is now a flow of writing that I haven't experienced for a long time. This is now something that I really want to write, and which can be used in different ways in the future even if the editor doesn't feel that it's quite what they want.

## [22] Submitting

How it is possible to write 4/14

Following my last post, perhaps two weeks later, and the shortest time I in which I think I have ever completed an article, I submitted a draft to the book editor. It certainly helped that they had asked for a draft. With it I explained that I had almost emailed to say that I was going to resign. I also explained my rationale for having gone through about three different formats and had now done something that was quite different to the original abstract. I found it good to be able to do this. I wanted to lay bare my thinking a bit, so at least there would be some principle to fall back on in case it was rejected.

I had continued to write the piece in fits and starts; but always managed to get on with it - and quite suddenly - when I remembered the quiet sentence by sentence voice I had acquired. A bit like writing a letter or even a blog like this one. And I finished it quite suddenly, about a day before I had finally imagined. In the process all sorts of distraction activities had taken place. I make it sound as though these happened to me rather than me doing them because that's a bit how it has been. I downloaded perhaps for the third time the Documents to Go app on my iPad, worked out how to sync it with Dropbox, after trying Google Drive not very successfully - it's so slow. This did mean that I could actually edit the text on my iPad occasionally, and was actually able to move ahead in this way. Though in the middle of all this I was trying other writing apps, yet again, to get better margins and a better interface with all my beloved shortcuts. I also downloaded the Endnote app and worked out how to sync it and can now get all my references there. I guess all of this was more productive than just vacuuming, tidying my office, and so on.

Well I got a response from the editor last night, just about 24 hours after submitting; and after a quick read they said they liked it! The feeling of calm was immense.

## [23] Working with narratives

Issues with culture 4/14

I used two of my narratives from one of the chapters in my new book<sup>2</sup> in my masters class. We spent time going through them line by line, pausing to discuss as insights and issues emerged. The detail in the narratives worked well as we got into the intricacies of how the characters' relationships and discourses developed. I was pleased because each stage of this development seemed to resonate with the experiences of the students. The real evidence of their validity was when at the end the students suggested other things that might be going on between the lines and other depths and possibilities for the characters. And I began to discover things about these characters I had invented which I hadn't imaged before. I was also pleased that when I presented the students with empty categories of cultural action they were able to be quite creative in suggesting what to put into them. Then it became evident what they had understood which I also hadn't imagined. Discourses of culture are to me difficult concepts; but it was the students who were suggesting which should go where and even re-evaluating my descriptions of them.

The most important thing of all is that this group of students is multinational and from a range of cultural environments, yet they demonstrated huge commonality in what they can share when talking about culture. There is a section in my book which lists cultural practices to do with eating, furniture, washing, meetings and so on, without mentioning countries of origin. There was only one practice which seemed exclusive to a particular place. The others were just a rich opportunity to talk about all sorts of things of mutual interest.

A major aim of this material was to develop in its readers, and also in me its writer, a life of its own which could transport us all to new domains of cultural understanding. There is now evidence at least with one group of students that this can be achieved.

Another point, this time of pedagogy, is that it is worth the effort to take time to go through something in detail. At one point in the class I worried that

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<sup>2</sup> Understanding intercultural communication: negotiating a grammar of culture, 1st edition, Routledge 2014.

the process was becoming tedious; and there was a clear exhaustion. The first break was after almost two hours by the consent of the class. It was two sessions together. But after a half hour break they came back with renewed energy and the hard work seemed to pay off. My initial anxiety comes from the dominant view that everything should not only be immediately understood, but that there should be immediate evidence that this is so. This is by no means necessarily the case.

## [24] Stuck in reflection

How it is possible to write 5/14

I had just finished an article which is based on several presentations I have given recently. This is to go on my website. It is actually taking one of the narratives from my recent book and developing it further - relating it more precisely to discourses of culture and then to the different worlds of reality and unreality at the end of my 2011 book<sup>3</sup>. As always this activity has taken my thinking further. This is a reason for not just writing for publication. Writing in itself helps tremendously to move things on.

So what is the reason for getting stuck in the final section for over a week? I decided to write a postscript on the nature of the narratives themselves. I read in a recent book a critique on the way that I have been writing them. This comes from someone who engages with my work in some detail - and has actually read it in some detail. So I am very prepared to address very seriously the accusation that almost all the narratives are polarised to a degree between Western and non-Western characters - and that the former are far less developed and suffer greatly from being painted as lacking in understanding - whereas the latter always do well and come out on top. Well, this is true. So what am I doing? Well I know what I'm doing; but can I explain it? So this is what I'm finding so difficult to write. Am I really West bashing? I don't think I really am; but can I explain it? I have to explain it.

Also, why am I getting into such a tiz about something that I'm not even publishing? It's going to be on my website; so the quality has to be very high; and I don't have reviewers to check on that. I can though choose to make the postscript into a separate article.

Perhaps more importantly, this has set me thinking more about this West-rest relationship and my place in it. This is all to do with the intricacies of the 'West as steward' discourse. I need to give three presentations in Helsinki in

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<sup>3</sup> Intercultural communication and ideology, Sage.

two weeks' time; and I can see a new idea coming along about the very complex Othering issues that arise out of this.

## [25] Blogging does help ... and cafés and music

How it is possible to write 5/14

It certainly does help to clear the air and move on in writing by writing a blog about it. Other things too. Sitting in a café - that hour or so, or even half an hour of stolen time - alone but with lots of people - especially if one is writing about people - and not being able to get up and do something else too easily, without packing things up. And also listening to music - Fayrooz, Um Kalthoum, Marzieh, The Cream ... and so on.. I have the music on my phone set to random tracks ... so lots of other things ... but I smile most when those come up.

## [26] Small steps, abstracts and positioning

How it is possible to write 6/14

Very small things can help in getting on with writing. I was equally stuck on writing a new chapter for a book, on appropriate methodology, which I should know all about, and writing a small abstract for our upcoming Cutting Edges conference. Then I suddenly realised they should both be the same. I did the abstract then very quickly; and now I know how to proceed in the chapter.

Then, during our research student conference last Friday, when I had to focus on the excellent papers in a particular way because I had to sum up at end the of the conference - I realised it was all about positioning. In three short papers, researchers were making small decisions about where to stand, how to look at their slides, how to look at the audience, how to talk about one to the other. There was a huge physicality here which mirrored how researchers must position themselves in their writing. And the abstract for the conference paper is a major part of this.

So, I have puzzled at how conference presentations can really be preparation for publication - that is, in disciplines like mine where you don't write the paper first, and there often is hardly any discussion afterwards. It is the notes, the title, the slides and so on, and thinking how to manipulate these for the audience, which practice the positions which will be played out in the written piece. It is like a field enactment of the eventual article, chapter or thesis.

This is why the conference presentation is better not to be a report of research, but instead a positioning of the research.

## [27] Every minute counts

How it is possible to write 6/14

I have long realised that putting aside longer periods of time doesn't necessarily mean writing more. On the other hand not letting opportunities pass is crucial. This morning, fifteen minutes before going out I opened my laptop and wrote a paragraph. This was after two hours yesterday seeking out a chapter in a book and then taking notes, and then an evening of having the time but not getting anything done. So I read the student work I needed to for today last night; and that gave me extra time this morning. But it wasn't until just before going out that I made the paragraph. Somehow it was the urgency that made it work.

## [28] Making ethnographic narratives

Issues with culture 6/14

I was overjoyed when I asked my students to write ethnographic narratives for their assignment and they did well.

The rules were simple - third person, no judgement of the characters, no adjectives or adverbs, no reference to country or cultural background, at least one character who comes in with an unexpectedly different take on things.

The narratives were beautifully written. What was particularly good was the students' statements of how much they had learnt about themselves, the characters and the nature of culture during the process of writing. This implied that the narratives really had taken on a life of their own beyond the agenda of the writer. They had engaged with a form of research which had taken them in small steps to unexpected understandings.

## [29] No evidence

Issues with culture 7/14

When I read novels by writers from supposedly very foreign places, like Nadifa Mohammed's *The orchard of lost souls*, about civil-war-torn Somalia, there is absolutely no evidence of the non-Western cultural strangeness one might be led to expect. In this novel, the political and economic conditions are extremely and unbelievably harsh. The three women characters suffer extreme deprivation and aggression. Yet their humanity shines through in a way which is supremely recognisable. They are people just like anyone anywhere in the world, but living in particular and harsh circumstances. As such they draw on



cultural practices which belong to them and their region. They dream of the traditions and foods of their parents and their youths and the old imageries of the better days of their surroundings. This may be where the particular nature of their cultural backgrounds lie; but these traditions and imageries are accessible to any reader who is prepared to say that these are 'human beings just like us'.

### [30] What I must always do and not do

How it is possible to write 7/14

I need to learn the lesson that I expect of my students - and that they expect of their students. I should never start a paragraph without a key sentence that states how ... And even now I'm finding it hard to say. Ok, there has to be a statement at the beginning of each paragraph, or very near the beginning, like in the second sentence, which says what the paragraph is saying and how this links to the last one. And if it's the beginning of a section. It has to say what the section is saying and how it links to the last one - and this will be closer to the message of the whole piece. This is not gratuitous signposting. It's communicating with an audience.

Another useful thing is always to write the paragraph or section in response to an imagined question from a reader who is likely to disagree with you but who is willing to be convinced.

And what I must not do - ever again.

Open a document in Pages on my iPad, which I've neatly saved to Dropbox, which has Endnote fields in it, and then save it back into Word when I've finished editing, and then cut and paste the changed paragraph into the document on my laptop with the Endnote fields still in it. I did this yesterday. At first it looked good. All the fields were still there. But when I updated the citations almost every one in the document was hit by something like a stroke or seizure. They not only moved to other places in the document; but the page references attached themselves to different authors. It took me a good hour or two to cut and paste the reference fields from an earlier version. Yes, always important to have an earlier version. And I could only do this when the document had been completely cleaned of fields.

Of course I could just use Documents to Go, which keeps all the Endnote fields and formatting intact. But I hate it because it doesn't have margins and also doesn't really work with my keyboard shortcuts, of which I have about 117. They work a bit, for perhaps one or two times. Then the app just seems to get tired; and they stop working completely.

## [31] Themes, technology, bits of text, and multiple sites

How it is possible to write 8/14

It's getting boring to say that I almost gave up completely yet again, on a piece I have been writing for an edited book. I got to the point where I thought dementia might be setting in as I struggled with a couple of paragraphs and two or three organisational structures and seemed to spend an awful long time getting nowhere. I even thought of giving up my entire academic career!

Then it suddenly began to fall into place and move on quickly. It's odd that when you are stuck you wonder how you ever managed to write anything in the past. And now even completely new ideas are emerging. With my newly positive mind I can say that writing is always a good way to develop ideas.

So what did it? A technological breakthrough of huge dimension. (I am being ironic here.) In my last blog I described making an appalling mess of moving text from my laptop to my iPad while using Endnote. I consulted the Endnote email help and got an immediate response. Convert the citation fields into unformatted mode. Then they can go anywhere without being corrupted, and be brought back again and be formatted perfectly. Well, it works. Moreover, you can edit the fields directly in the text once you understand the fairly simple grammar. You can also bring references in from the Endnote app on your iPad. This means I can use Pages on my iPad and really get to like it. I can curl up on the sofa while watching television, sit in easy chairs in the café, with my iPad mini - and it has to be mini - on my knee and write.

This brings the text down to a small size on a small screen - almost like scribbling on bits of paper - and is just another place to write.

But this is just the technology. I had ended up with a text full of bits and pieces, some of course pulled from previous writing, quite jumbled, with a very unconvincing argument to bind it together. I knew it was all relevant; but much of it was quite old, some of it far too theoretical without examples. An idea came at the usual time, about five or six in the morning, which was the key to the whole lot - and also a strategy - to treat it all like qualitative data and arrange it thematically, and develop the main idea all the way through. As with writing qualitative data, juxtaposing the various bits, mixing ideas and examples, began to generate something completely new.

So now I feel rejuvenated, with a new idea, and dementia put off for at least a while.

## [32] Conference presentations that never really get there

How it is possible to write 9/14

So many conference presentations that spend ages on theory and methodology that we've all heard before, and don't get to the really interesting data and findings until right at the end. Well perhaps I did this myself. Should always take the courage to begin with the data, the narratives, images, or whatever. Begin with the points.

## [33] Stepping out of the convenient

Issues with culture 10/14

After a recent conversation with a colleague who referred to himself as a 'non-native speaker' I was shocked into yet another realisation about just how divisive the whole discourse about the native-non-native speaker divide is. This was shocking because I had never associated him with this label. I have spent most of my life with family, friends, colleagues and students who do not have English as the first language they spoke as children, who I have never associated with the 'non-native speaker' label. They are just people who speak English, even though in very different ways - different personalities - and with varying degrees of ease.

Of course, I spent much of my early career as a teacher of English; and there my students' English was a point of focus. But this was surely because of the confines of a professional contract. Outside the classroom, outside the institution, they were still just speakers of English. And I don't really think that I ever associated my colleague teachers with the 'native speaker' or 'non-native speaker' labels.

Also of course, these terms can sometimes have neutral connotation, perhaps when we are looking for a teacher of French or Japanese for ourselves or our children - perhaps because there isn't the same type world politics associated with those languages - because there isn't a profound and neo-racist ideology of native-speakerism. Or perhaps I'm just a naïve outsider to those domains.

However, in English language education across the world we don't have this innocence. The 'native speaker' and 'non-native speaker' labels are divisive in a profound manner. There is now no doubt that they represent 'us'-them' images of proficient versus deficient culture, and also touch on the nasty realm of skin colour. And yet, these labels persist as though they are harmless - referring to colleagues or student teachers as though they are a

useful way of distinguishing one from another. And, I'm afraid to say that it seems mostly true that while the labels sound innocent they always carry at least a tinge of judgement about something cultural - time keeping, dependability - those 'us'-'them' references that keep on seeping between the lines and never go away.

I therefore really think we need to take a no-tolerance position. For me, it is no longer acceptable even to use the terms 'native speaker teachers' and 'non-native speaker teachers' in inverted commas, to indicate so-called, because even that holds the impression that there are groups of teachers that somehow correspond with the labels. The full discursual role of the terms has instead to be made explicit in cumbersome phrases like 'teachers who are labelled 'native speakers' to make it absolutely clear that any presumed correspondence between the terms and actual groups of people is false and ideological.

This quite rightly does make it cumbersome and difficult to use 'non-native speaker' or 'native speaker' at all.

We really don't need these labels. There are so many other ways of talking about people, and about English teachers than the convenient ones we are used to.

### [34] What is behind native-non-native-speaker labelling?

Issues with culture 10/14

Further to my last blog, my attitude to the 'native speaker' and 'non-native speaker' labels may have something to do with my own professional trajectory. I don't recall them being used at all when I took up my first teaching job at the British Council in Tehran in 1973. Half the teachers were Iranian, including one of the people who first observed me teach. It was all to do with who could teach rather than what their childhood first language was. At the same time I was surrounded by Iranian people who spoke English in my wife's family and amongst friends; and I never thought of the label in connection with them.

There was however what I now recognise as a sinister view that learning and teaching English required adopting a particular and Western cultural orientation which was constructed and imagined as superior. And this was to do with a practice and use orientation in opposition to a theory and literature orientation, which went with the anti-intellectual audiolingual approach of the time. I now recognise this as a native-speakerist ideology, though I didn't connect it then with the 'native speaker' label.

This did begin to change though, with the advent of the first Cambridge certificate in teaching. I have a distant recollection that there was some discussion about whether this would be open to teachers who were labelled as 'non-native speakers'. At about the same time, I remember the British Council instituting a new layer of 'senior teachers' who I think had to be employed from London, which led to the sudden demotion of locally engaged teachers, including of course all the Iranians. This seemed to be part of an efficiency drive and a new moulding of British Council image. Many of the novels in the library, which had a huge cultural attraction, were replaced with science and technology books, and the content of classes became more centralised with less choice for teachers.

When I did my masters degree at Lancaster I don't recall anyone ever using the 'native speaker' and 'non-native speaker' labels in our highly multinational class. (Some of my colleagues there might correct me about this.) My next two jobs were at universities in Syria and Egypt. And here also I don't recall any question regarding the English of my Syrian and Egyptian colleagues. They were specialists in their fields and accomplished academics; and I don't recall use of the label 'non-native speaker'. Again, however, there was instead an insinuation regarding cultural approaches to teaching and learning that only the foreign, British and American teachers could do because of their imagined superior cultural background.

My conclusion to this experience is therefore twofold. First, as expressed in my previous blog, the 'native speaker' and 'non-native speaker' labels really are not necessary and have become common within a particular professional discourse. They really have not always been there, and we really don't need them. It might indeed be argued that the labels began to come to prominence as the modernist desire for definition of targeted skills and content increased.

Second, native-speakerism begins not with the labels but with a far deeper and implicit neo-racist imagination about superior and inferior cultures of teaching and learning. This native-speakerism is therefore deeply and often invisibly behind any mention of the 'native speaker' and 'non-native speaker' labels. This means that whenever they are used within the domain of international English language education, this insidious neo-racism stands behind them, perhaps with the excuse of the modernist need to define and prescribe.

## [35] So what is culture?

Issues with culture 2/15

So what is culture? Culture is whatever you see around you wherever you look. This is of course when you are looking at people; though it could also be wherever there is some sort of social behaviour going on - animals and perhaps other organisms. It might become 'a culture' when you draw a conceptual line around what you see. So that culture I saw yesterday from where I was sitting was like that; whereas this one I can see now is like this. But these boundaries are of course constructed by you. They are heuristic to help you make sense of what you see. But they are also dangerous because you might begin to think that these boundaries are an integral part of the culture itself. What is always good to realise is that everyone will see something different to what you see. The people next to you will construct different boundaries to the ones that you construct.

However, there is something else going on. Boundaries are often constructed for us by others - governments, education systems, advertising, the media, all sorts of groups (family, sports, religious, occupational, commercial and so on). Each of us also take part to lesser or greater degrees in these constructions, depending on the power we possess. Strictly speaking, these boundaries are features of whatever culture we are looking at. So it is part of the culture that such and such boundaries are constructed in such and such ways. However, for a lot of people it is not the constructions of the boundaries but the boundaries themselves that are defining features. This is complicated though. We may inside ourselves know that they are constructions; but for various reasons we will declare that they are real, especially in times of difficulty when we need to work hard to assert ourselves against others. And these assertions themselves take on particular senses of reality. Perhaps the more we are under pressure the more they seem real. And when our strongly asserted realities are pitched against different ones asserted by others, then we might go to war. The difficulties that accentuate these realities can be economic or political - scarcity of resources or lack of power and status.

These realities - constructed boundaries that take on lives of their own - are the basis of ideologies and grand narratives. The manner in which we form, consolidate, talk about, present them, oppose them, and so on, are discourses.

And notice that, as I proceed through this description, I shift from talking about culture as an uncountable to cultures as countables. It is so hard to continue speaking about culture without falling into the trap of boundaries.

## [36] Moving on

How it is possible to write 2/15

As I get into writing a new paper I am determined to continue to move forward in developing a more personal and less cluttered writing style. The initial problem is the huge backstory and the traditional expectation for literature review and arrangement of empirical evidence. What I have to do is to take everything I know about using evidence, making claims, showing that I have read, acknowledging scholarship, allowing my data to have its own space, and giving full weight to the massive paradigm change that marks my discipline - and make it work in a different way to work in a more personal and less cluttered style. In essence, then, I need to take the deeper principles of scholarly writing and then re-apply them to a more personal style. I then find myself following a train of thought that leads more naturally from one step to the next - why did I ask the questions I am asking, where do they come from, what the implications are for how I think about my participants, and so on. And then, as I cite someone, I have to think about that too, and how it relates to my whole project. This then leads me to see something I hadn't seen before; and I begin to use some of the detail of what this person says to help me to move to the next stage. Then, the next day, I listen to an inspiring presentation from a research student, which also has huge impact on this process. I move therefore slowly, from one thought to another; but there is a more refreshing sense-making.

## [37] What to do about multiple identity constructions

Issues with culture 3/15

Getting on with my new article. I have been really helped by recent discussions with research students about how people identify themselves and how we identify them. It seems to me a matter of fact that all of us present ourselves in different ways at different times and for different reasons. We all employ different discourses of culture and align ourselves with different cultural groups, which sometimes seem in conflict. It is difficult for researchers to know what to make of this complexity. What is important is the issue of the time - the particular injustice of the time. So, if huge numbers of people across the world are not recognised for who they really are because of false messages that come from the Centre, then we need to listen to what people have to say about that.

## [38] Reading good fiction

Issues with culture 6/15

How is it that when we read good fiction written by authors with completely different cultural backgrounds to our own, and about lives and histories that are so far away from ours, we are still able to make sense and even to identify with significant parts of what they write about?

Of course we come from different places and are brought up differently, with widely different experience of family, food, media, all the daily business of going about our lives and getting things done. Nevertheless, amongst this experience there is always something we can recognise. It is not only recognition and understanding; but there are things that we can bring back and make a difference to who we are and what we notice and understand about our own lives.

Perhaps it is part of what makes a good novelist, film maker, painter and so on - to be able to get to, make some sense of, and say something meaningful about those things that resonate across whatever it is that can divide us. This is something about a deeper instinct about humanity.

It might seem silly and unnecessary to be saying these things. To an audience of interculturalists I think though that it needs to be said that we never think we need intercultural training to be able to read good fiction. So why should we need it to encounter and engage with the real thing? Surely it's because 'the real thing' has been bound up in our minds with globally divisive narratives about 'culture' and 'values' that get in the way of our instinctive human abilities to interact with each other.

## [39] The issue of values

Issues with culture 7/15

The issue of values is difficult. Having different values is in many ways the core of diversity. They can also bring out the best in us when they relate to good principles of action and understanding.

Several points need to be considered though. One is that we can claim exclusivity about values that are in fact shared by others. Claiming them just for ourselves contributes to cultural Othering and it is a major mechanism for the construction of ideologies of conflict - maintaining that we value something whereas the enemy does not. Values can therefore be framed in such a way that they fuel conflict.



Claiming exclusivity of values can also lead to cultural relativism. This is a dangerous and patronising discourse of culture because it implies that people can somehow be released from having to be or to do certain types of things because their culture is different. We can think 'we don't expect them to share our values because their culture is different'. So, people from certain 'cultures' can be released from valuing self-determination. This can become a rationale for oppression; but it can also be a rationale for people, who claim that they have the only culture that values freedom, to oppress others by pretending to bring freedom to them. At the same time, 'culture' should not be a rationale for values. They should always be contestable.

On the other hand, there are perhaps values that have a lower stake in that they are not necessarily so divisive and just indicate the variety of how we see the world. For example, valuing space in different ways. Some people might prefer to fill space with furniture and others to empty the space of furniture. Some people might value freshly bought bread every day; others might value the time saved by storing bread at home. Some may value the coolness of darkened rooms; and others hotter lighter rooms.

In all cases, though, values must be constructions. They are do do with how we construct the world - with how we position ourselves, with the Self and Other politics of who we think we are. Therefore, when we talk about values, all of this politics will be at play. The only fact of the matter will be that what we claim our values to be is what we claim our values to be. They are how we want to be seen to be represented. Aligning ourselves to them is important for us to declare. This does not however mean that they define our actions.

## [40] Talking about cultural difference - blocks and threads

Issues with culture 7/15

There is no question at all that we are culturally different to each other because of the way we are brought up in different nation states. So much of who we are and what we think is influenced by educational, political, economic and media systems that are often specific to national structures and policies. Then there are life-defining resources to do with climate, physical geography, and agriculture, some of which can also be influenced or even determined by national and geo-politics.

These things are not however the issue. It is what happens next that is important - what we do with and how we think about and frame these backgrounds.

I find it helpful here to distinguish between blocks and threads as alternative ways of thinking and talking about cultural difference. This exchange is an example of blocks - asking questions and getting answers that encourage us to think about cultural barriers:

'How do people in your culture behave at mealtimes?' 'The whole family arrives on time and eats together; and show their appreciation of the person who has prepared the meal, who is normally the mother.' 'Oh, interesting. That's a bit different to my culture and others I have been to, where the whole thing is less formal and organised. But we can certainly learn from each other in this respect.'

There is some sharing here; but it doesn't really get beyond an 'us'-'them' concept of 'my culture' and 'your culture'. The barriers remain up. It stops dangerously at tolerance.

What I mean by threads is quite different - searching for ways to share experiences - threads of cultural experience that we carry with us but that can resonate with those of others.

When I find myself talking to two people sitting at the next table in a café in Algiers, I have to work on this by looking for cultural threads that might bring us together. Perhaps they are interested in talking to me, and make the first move, because I look foreign, might have rather clumsily looked for a table and been generally uncertain about how to come and sit down in a café like this one in Algiers. However, instead of looking at them as essentially foreign, which would be easy, I have to focus on how they are café sitters like me. So I talk to them about cafés, about how good it is to sit and relax, about the sorts of work that we have, leisure activities, where we have travelled to, what it is like to be away from home, this part of the city and its history, and so on.

On another occasion I am with a young Chinese man who is taking me in his car to a conference. (It's his job to look after me for the day as a visiting speaker.) Imagining his age and perhaps noticing some young children things on the back seat, I use my recent experience with my daughter and grandchildren to talk to him about child-care, how being a parent impacts on his career and so on.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The two examples later appeared in 'Difference and awareness in cultural travel: negotiating blocks and threads', *Language & Intercultural Communication* 16/3, 2016, and Holliday & Amadasi, *Making sense of the intercultural: finding deCentred threads*, Routledge 2020, pages 52-3.

I suppose this is not unlike making conversation a lot of the time. But we do have to work at it - searching for resonances. While cultural difference is still on the agenda, the effect can be to open up possibilities for sharing and crossing boundaries. This does however mean that the act of talking to people about cultural difference, whether in interviews or in conversation, or in the sort of interpersonal research cultural travellers may engage in, there might be something strategic to do - to get to talking and thinking that gets us to new places of understanding about who we are and how we can be together. For the first time, surprisingly, I can see a route here through to a possibility for intercultural training!

## [41] Moving between blocks and threads - sharing humanity

Issues with culture 8/15

Of course, in our everyday conversations, we move between block and thread ways of talking about cultural difference all the time. The block mode - 'my culture, your culture' - is what we have somehow, all of us, grown up with as our default language for talking about culture, probably because of our recent modern histories of cultural nationalism.

So sometimes we do need to reinforce our senses of identity by projecting stories of cultural exclusivity; and we might even believe them for the moment when we are doing this. We might even believe these things about ourselves and the people we want to be associated with most of the time.

But we can almost at the same time, in some sort of parallel images of ourselves, be very different sorts of cultural beings. This is when we can share the multiple and complex threads of our lives with others - when we can find bits of our life experiences that resonate powerfully with those of others.

Finding and recognising cultural threads that we can share is so important in finding the humanity that we share. It is so important that when we see images of the migrants who are desperately trying to cross boundaries in Calais and Kos, to understand that these are people in so many ways just like us, with whom we can have conversations about things that have meaning for each of us - relationships, family, having children and grandchildren, professions, being employed, being valued, the daily struggles with identity, conflicts within our families and at work, going to school, being taught, hating being taught. These days we might even have seen the same movies, TV shows, read the same books, heard the same childhood stories. How we do these things differently, how we bring different meanings to them, because of our

different upbringings and backgrounds, is what is so exciting to talk about and to learn about from each other.

So beware of the block way of talking and thinking. It might look like the innocent sharing of cultures, indulging in dreadful stereotypes that we think might be harmless. But this is what we also invoke, what our media invokes for us and we conveniently believe, when we feel threat, when we want to exclude, when we want to close our borders and worse. It's all politics and business.

## [42] Engaging with foreign places

Issues with culture 8/15

Following my previous posts about blocks and threads, I can now see why it is so important for people who stay in foreign places for a long time to engage with their histories and cultural scenes.

I am thinking particularly about students I know who come from far away but are carrying out research on some aspect of the cultural or professional life of where they come from. It may seem that what they need to do is to research that cultural scene. But so much can be learnt from researching the strangeness of the place where they are living. An opportunity not to be missed.

I am not talking about block thinking - this is 'their culture' and this is how it's different to 'my culture'. I am talking instead about searching for the threads that resonate with the ones that we have grown up with.

Now I can see why I was so interested in TV dramas, pop music history and cultural references when I lived in Iran between the ages of 23 and 30. I was never a great language learner; but I think I did learn about the locatedness of things - what was going on and why it was going on - where people came from and the histories that gave them meaning. Somehow this helped me to think about who I was too. As my dear colleague Sue-san Ghahremani-Ghajar told me - when we travel to foreign places we can discover that 'their stories are also our stories'<sup>5</sup>. But we need to search hard for this connection; and we can only do it through thinking about cultural threads - not the blocks that keep us apart.

So this is why I constantly encourage students to watch British TV - not because of some daft idea about integration or assimilation - but to find things that help them to get to the bottom of other things.

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<sup>5</sup> This is taken from Ghahremani-Ghajar, S., *Secrets of the turtle*, Centre for International Scientific Studies & Collaboration, 2009, Tehran, Iran.

It can also be small doses - fleeting images and passing impressions, sounds and images - that might not make any sense until a long time later. So this is why, perhaps only occasionally, I switch to local TV channels in languages I don't understand in hotel rooms in the places where I have the opportunity to visit. There is always something to connect.

### [43] The pleasure of writing - shortening and refining

How it is possible to write 8/15

As I get to the last part of writing the third edition of my Qualitative Research book I can reflect on what a pleasurable experience it has been. Initially there were difficult thickets of old writing that had to be cut through and rooted out, once the roots could be found. But then there was the easier task of just finding better ways to say things.

Also I have been collecting some new material through interviews with researchers. When the mind is fresh there is also some appreciation of the skill of being able to get to the core of what they are saying - again, cutting and cutting, carving and polishing, until it is found. Reading and making sense, and then finding the best way to present what they have to say and to put into words what I want to say about it - and the courage that that takes.

I am reminded of the sculptor who gets to an imagined shape in the middle of a block of marble. I work completely on the screen, never printing out anything. But I find occasionally using the quick Notes app on my Mac and iPad, helpful. The image on the screen is like my canvas or block of marble. But I can also look at it in different forms and materials by sometimes working on the same text that has been synced to my iPad - where it really is like an archetypal tablet that I can place on my knee wherever I'm sitting and work on the text as if on a piece of stone.

All of this though sometimes just doesn't really work for days and days. Then when it does everything is ok again.

### [44] Final submission

How it is possible to write 9/15

This evening I sent of the manuscript for the third edition of my qualitative research book to the publisher. Right on time - well after getting a month's extension about six weeks ago. The whole thing took me from the beginning of August. The final steps were doing short conclusions and some activities for each chapter to help readers find their way around. This made me look again

at the content of each chapter; and I was surprised to find some places that still needed some serious editing. These were mainly remains of old literature review sections that were still cluttered with awful thickets of quotations, that needed clearing, rebuilding and serious shortening. For the last week I've been hovering around within 1,000 words over the required limit. Finally I got it down to 124 words over. I also had to add in about 1000 words of material from two crucial last-minute email interviews.

I sent off three files - a pdf so that they can see the layout in case the word documents wandered a bit. (I had included all the figures in the text.) Then the original word document with all the Endnote fields, in case they might be of some use; and a document with all the Endnote fields converted into plain text.

Writing this helps me to get closure - and on to the next writing task.

## [45] Returning to recent writing

How it is possible to write 10/15

I'm returning to a piece of writing I started in April and then had to leave because of other commitments. Since then my ideas have moved on as a result of more recent research - mainly the stuff about blocks and threads. Now I have a new deadline to finish this by the end of the month, after having negotiated more time some time ago.

The original text is not bad at all, based on the paper I gave in Malaysia, and trying to use a more personal voice; and I can see now how to complete the paper as it stood at that time - better than I could then. But how can I go ahead and not get my new ideas in. They don't change things. They add a new layer that gives much more sense.

I have to work at this. Something better must come out of it.

It helps me to write this. Perhaps being able to put the actual problem itself into writing is the thing to do.

## [46] Getting a new storyline

How it is possible to write 10/15

Still struggling with this text. It should be obvious; but every time I still have to remind myself all over again. The answer is to create a storyline. And every time there is a new idea or concept there needs to be a revised, new storyline. I think I have worked out what the new storyline will be. Now I have to work out how to re-organise, to re-arrange, to re-design the order of the material that I

already have, to fit the storyline. Then I need to work out new transitions. It's more difficult than it sounds.

## [47] Positioning and characterisation

How it is possible to write 10/15

Now getting to the end of the piece I am writing. There is no way I can miss the deadline of the end of this weekend. It's good that I have the PowerPoint notes of what was I think quite a good conference presentation that the paper is based upon. However, building in my new ideas about blocks and threads has continued to be problematic. The good thing is that I am learning more about the concept in trying to do this. To make it work though, in the last part of the paper, I have to make a lot of decisions about how to arrange the material. There are people and their thoughts that need to be positioned alongside things that I have recently read. I have to create new characters that can best represent the thinking that continues to develop as I write. And all the way through I have to do this in a way that also forces me into seeing things in a different and better way. There are two protagonists and an event. The event is becoming clear in my mind; but I have to look for names for the characters that will lead both the reader and myself to think differently about it.

This is the sort of creative process that all writers of qualitative research need to get into. It is also so important to be able to talk about it. As supervisors too we are supposed to demonstrate the process of doing our research to our students - to try and lay bare our craft for them. It helped me so much to explain what I was doing to my student in our tutorial yesterday - and also trying to make it relevant, I hope, to what she was doing. Arranging complicated material, finding the best way to represent it in text, and keeping the right balance between our own and other voices.

## [48] Blocking threads and threading blocks

Issues with culture 10/15

Following my posts about blocks and threads, further writing, and having spoken about them at the IALIC conference in Beijing, here are some more observations.

We cannot be naïve about the simple value of threads - about pulling threads from our own cultural experience to meet with those of others, and thus to begin crossing cultural boundaries. Threads can indeed be a valuable

means of achieving interculturality and breaking prejudice. And we must seek them out and struggle to make meaningful contact wherever we can. However, there will clearly be times when this does not work, or may seem to be work when in fact the opposite effect is taking place. It goes something like the following:

Threads that pull blocks. Sometimes what we draw from our experience might seem to us to be ways of connecting with the people we are interacting with; but we might miscalculate and they actually create blocks. This is why it can be such a struggle. We really need to think hard, to work out what really might connect. And even then our theories and hypotheses about the other person might still be all wrong. This might be something to do with imposing images of the world that might not be as shared as we imagine. This is why we really do need to look deeper to find what actually we can share.

Sometimes of course it just might not be possible. There might be incompatibilities that just cannot be overcome, and we have to walk away. And it might be insurmountable boundaries that are constructed by the other person. Of course none of this might have anything to do with cultural background. But there are things going on in the world that are setting up huge walls of cultural - perhaps claiming to be religious - division.

Blocking threads. There might also be threads that are set up primarily for the purpose of constructing division and aggression. People are reached out to by others for the purpose of being pulled into massive blocks - establishments of state, nationalism, religion, values. There are clear examples of these in our history; and there there are others upon us now. Indeed, what we know about the dangers of essentialism and Othering, about extreme Self and Other politics, provide those who have the ingenuity to dominate with the technologies to do so. The idealised society described in Plato's *Republic* is an ancient manual for this.

Threading blocks. In a very depressing scenario, this is where situations of violence and the cultural and political blocks of extreme identity and values construction, such as referred to above, have sustained for so long that young people have grown up with them and know little else. And what else they have experienced is coloured by extreme education. In such situations, the only threads that especially young people might have experience of are blocks.

Excuse the detail; but this is serious stuff. These are the potentials and conflicts that are evident in my grammar.



## [49] What to say about nation

Issues with culture 1/16

There has been a swing away from an essentialist approach to culture and from taking the nation state as the basic definer of everything around us. We should not however go too far in discounting everything that our national upbringing gives us, but put these influences in their place.

It seems clear that nation is politically and ideologically constructed, as are ideals that can exaggerate the unities of language and culture. In many cases, without getting into the deeper politics of what makes a nation 'recognised', nations do however often exist as geographical facts in the sense of having physically defended borders and passport controls. Through their particular education systems, economies, political structures and media configurations, they are hugely influential in how we are brought up. The left side of the grammar of culture acknowledges this influence through important cultural resources. Nations can inspire and be a major basis for identity.

The right side of the grammar also acknowledges the 'big C' products of literature, music fine art and so on. While these high points of civilisation very often cross boundaries, they are also influenced by the particular institutions of nation, and also by histories, narratives and traditions, many of which are formed or at least nurtured and emphasised through nation. There are also other marked regional influences including particular religious and political ideologies.

It is also a matter of fact that populations in particular parts of the world may share significant cultural references - music stories, narratives - that are not familiar to populations in other parts of the world. On the other hand, there are also cultural references that originate in particular geographical areas that have been translated by and become familiar to people brought up elsewhere.

However, the non-essentialist turn tells us is that none of these influences are confining. The essentialist view gives the false impression that we are all encased within national cultures as though they are boxes that contain, define and restrict everything that we are. The fact of the matter is however that nations are not like this, that people have cultural natures that can extend and travel beyond them, and that there is huge diversity within them. While nation can sometimes be defined by its physical borders, its influence on the cultural natures of people who live there cannot be defined.

In all circumstances it can be said that nations have cultures, in the same way that all human formations each have cultures. Saying that something has a culture means to me that there are processes going on between people and

institutions in that something that construct norms - ways of doing, ways of speaking. But these things that have cultures are part of the huge proliferation of cultural formations, most of which are small and all of which are in the process of change, as indicated in the centre part of the grammar. The constructing of norms can be top-down, bottom-up or sideways-in; and it does not mean that everyone conforms. Cultures of behaviour may also be regulated - laws, training, hierarchies and so on; but there will also be a politics of resistance. Nation might indeed be the least recognisable and the most distant from the everyday culture formations that we are engaged with at the local level, though invoked at times of conflict. National culture as a concept therefore belongs more to the domain of ideology and narrative than something that can be described.

Nation is therefore extremely important in who we are and how we are different to each other; but this is not a straightforward matter of this 'culture' versus that 'culture'. It provides us with rich resources upon which to build identity and perhaps dangerously powerful lenses through which to interpret behaviour and practices. It needs always to be put in its place, in the domain of statements about culture in the grammar of culture, tempered by discourses and coloured by global position and politics. At the same time, this non-essentialist approach to nation does not take away from the recognition of all those people who struggle for the preservation of a threatened nation or national identity, and for the immensely important values of national pride and civil society.

## [50] Narratives as dark matter

Issues with culture 3/16

I am referring to narratives as the stories that we use to make sense of the world and of each other. They are sometimes provided for us by the social structures that we are brought up with, though political ideologies, all sorts of media, what we are taught at school and university, and through our families and communities. They can be deeply historical and play a major role in how we are led to place ourselves in global positioning and politics - constructed from the myths of ancient battles and invasions, national or religious victories or defeats. In this sense they can be negative and destructive within the spiral of a Self and Other politics - the blocking narratives that lead to war and persecution.

Narratives do not however always have to be negative. Narratives of all types are around us all the time and also provide the material with which we

understand and connect with each other and with places. We are not isolated individuals or groups who simply go about our business in a mechanical, instrumental manner. Whatever we experience in encountering each other we connect in multiple ways to the stories we bring with us that are constructed from multiple images and memories.

This is evident anywhere at any time. But let's take the more 'exotic' example of sitting in the foyer of a hotel in China and talking for a moment to the young woman serving me coffee. She seemed as uncertain as me whether the group of people walking in a loose procession nearby were a wedding party - because the European-style dress of the woman at the front who might be the bride was pale blue. The narratives I brought to this were: large hotel foyers being places where weddings spill out; wedding dresses are special to the people who wear them but follow traditional styles; people who work in hotels have local knowledge; people don't know everything about their traditions; people share the desire to talk about what puzzles them; weddings have strong resonances of some sort with everyone; white European wedding dresses are popular everywhere (reference to brides posing for photographs on bridges in Cairo); particular wedding dress styles are particular to particular communities for particular reasons. Most people still opt to have a traditional wedding with white dresses, like those found on the internet for example. However, other cultures will have different wedding traditions where people may opt for dresses that are unlike the usual white that we see. This is often to keep with the tradition of their country or religion.

The presence of these narratives means that a lot is going on between people that fills the space even though it cannot be seen, and is in effect real and powerful material that brings us together. They can populate the threads that bring us together.

There could however have been other, bigger, essentialist narratives that I could have employed, which would have blocked the possibility of me coming together with the waiter, blocking the potential for us to share our thoughts about the 'wedding procession'. These blocking narratives would be the dominant stereotypes that we inherit - that we are essentially different - that we can never really understand each other - 'collectivist and hierarchical' versus 'individualist and democratic'.

All of these narratives are there. We have the moral responsibility to take action and choose with knowledge.

## [51] What is it possible to say and think about culture?

Issues with culture 6/16

In a non-essentialist approach we try to avoid using stereotypes to define and confine the characteristics of members of 'a culture'. We recognise that national or ethnic cultures are largely 'imagined' - ideologically defined, the constructs of political, nationalistic militaristic or other such agendas and narratives - carved by the modernistic structures of nation states. Nevertheless, a lot of people continue to find the concepts meaningful and want to be able to talk about them. I for one want to be able to say that when I first went to Iran I became absorbed in the culture - without insinuating a bounded exclusive thing that defines the behaviour, values and attitudes of all the people who are somehow considered to be 'in' it. I want 'Iranian culture' to imply a more porous set of practices, productions and influences that at goes beyond, inspires, but doesn't confine people. I want it to imply something big - a huge canvas that people look at, contemplate, have their lives changed by, creatively contribute to, and indeed infuse with particular values, histories, principles, and so on - but can pass in front of, walk away from, challenge, change, take part in from foreign places, appreciate from great distances, and be who they want to be within its sphere.

When 'culture' is used in this sense, it is therefore a more figurative use; and it has nothing to do with defining and describing, but with a feel, an atmosphere - a sense of being that actually defies definition and loses its focus the closer one looks at the detail of it - because at the closest level of detail people are just people. It becomes an impossibility to say 'in Iranian culture, ...' with any sort of defining phrase. I want it to imply the nature of civilisation, but as something expansive and reflexive, not competing and rejecting.

But if we want to describe a culture in any sort of precise terms - to talk about a culture with any sort of definable behavioural features, this is a very different matter and cannot be about large culture as civilisation. It must be about small cultures.

Where culture, whatever it is, can be seen to be working in a describable manner is in one's immediate vicinity, wherever you one happens to be near people. I have been looking back at what I said in my 1999 'small cultures' paper<sup>6</sup>. I define small cultures as 'small social groupings or activities where there is cohesive behaviour'. At the same time, when we think about what we can say

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<sup>6</sup> Applied Linguistics 20/2. The full text can be found at <http://adrianholliday.com/articles/>

about small cultures, it helps us to see what we can say about culture in any circumstances.

We all seem to know how culture operates in the smaller entities such as companies, families, sports groups and so on. We can commonly talk about how the culture of our organisation, or of the other department down the corridor, or of our own department needs to be changed, is changing, is like this or like that, is conducive to this or to that and so on. And I don't think that when we do this we get carried away and imagine that all the people who work there are somehow defined by these cultures to the extent that the culture becomes the essence of who they are - in an essentialist way. When we leave the place where we work at and go home or meet our friends in a sports club, we might join with the spirit of the cultures that we find there and behave in very different ways. Of course we will also have our own personalities, histories, anxieties, dreams and preoccupations that will mediate how we move between and make sense of these cultures.

Also, at the small culture level we can begin to see the beginnings of the ideological forces that generate imagined essentialist notions about ethnic and national large cultures.

We may be unlucky, or lucky, enough to be, or have been, part of work or other small culture groups that are particularly aggressive in how they promote particular cultures of behaviour through training. The military or some professions are like this - or perhaps some religious groups or cults. And sometimes people who belong to such groups might find it harder to move to others. But, nevertheless, I think we are also used to seeing around these things - seeing them for what they are. Even when we take part in intense cultural competition with say another sports team, and take part in heavy and sometimes aggressive rituals of opposition - chants, clothing, body painting and tattoos - there will be parts of us that can step outside this behaviour.

This sort of competing with the Other does however take us into the domain of powerful ideologies that can overwhelm and take over everything that we are, or that we might buy into with an all-possessing totality. The discourses that represent these ideologies can invade us with their language and ways of conceptualising things. Sexism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and all sorts of fundamentalism, can lead us into huge, blind inhumanities.

This temptation to Other is referred to in the central small culture formation domain of my grammar of culture; and it is a vicious Self and Other politics - the sometimes gross, extreme hyperbole of who we are in opposition to the people we don't like. While culture might not actually be mentioned, judgements about exaggerated differences in behaviour and values will often become the imagined 'evidence' for the need to discriminate.

This then connects with the other sort of reference to 'culture' - the large culture stuff, where all sorts of things just seem to get out of hand. My association of this sometimes national or international domain with 'ethnic' earlier in this blog of course raises a contentious issues. We sort of know what nation is, at least where it appears in the passports of those of us who are lucky enough to have them, or when we need visas. Ethnicity is even more subjective. The issue however is not so much whether these things are objectively real or not, but rather the way in which they are claimed as prescribed.

There seems to be a great irony here. I am arguing that at the small culture level we can begin to see how large culture imaginations and claims come to be. It can also be argued that the people who spin these imaginations and claims are treating culture as civilisation as though it were a small culture. They are attempting to pull the big canvas of human experience down to the level of an organisation or a company or military unit. This can unfortunately be a highly successful enterprise, at least for the short term. But as with small cultures, as soon as people have the opportunity to leave, they will not be confined.

## [52] About boundaries of cultures

Issues with culture 6/16

I have talked about small cultures as being things that can be seen and described. Does this mean that they exist as things, as entities that have boundaries? And if they do, can we not work up from this and think of there being large cultures with boundaries? And if that is not the case, where is the upper limit of the possibility of actual real cultures with boundaries? Am I arguing that beyond a certain largeness it is not possible for a culture to exist as a thing with boundaries?

These might though be the wrong questions. Indeed, I think that they are the wrong questions - because saying that cultures have boundaries at all is actually just an operational thing - something we do for the purpose of finding out about something else - a heuristic.

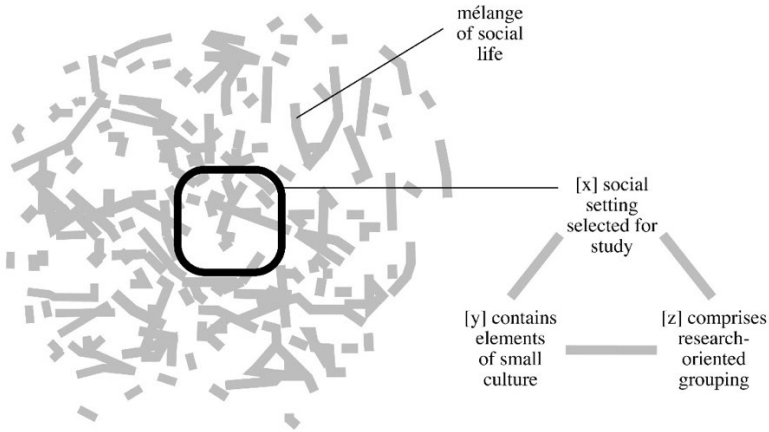
This is what is expressed in the diagram (Figure 3), that I have been carrying with me since it first appeared in my 1999 'small cultures' paper<sup>7</sup>.

The point is that the boundaries of a culture are from our own sense-making. They are operational. We, as researchers, or simply as people looking at

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<sup>7</sup> Applied Linguistics 20/2. The full text can be found at <http://adrianholliday.com/articles/>

the world, imagine boundaries around whatever we are looking at to serve the operation of looking.



*Figure 3: Small culture selected for ethnography*

There is no particular evidence that the *mélange* of social life has boundaries at all other than the ones we operationally set - just human activity going on and on, changing its nature as it extends across diverse conditions of geography, economic and political possibilities, and so on. Even where there are national boundaries (which are set by nations), or, at the smaller level, boundaries between buildings, groups employed by a particular entity, operationally defined boundaries may extend across these sorts of boundaries. Indeed, all sorts of boundaries may extend beyond and cross all sorts of boundaries. This is especially the case where communication networks transcend national, building, organisation and other boundaries. And with the Internet this can now be physically seen with a particular ease.

So, we could say that a culture is whatever is going on within the operational boundaries of human activity that we choose to look at. A culture may therefore, for the sake of argument, be part of a family group in a particular room in the residence of one of them, and a vendor in the street below, and the business that the vendor belongs to, extending to her employer and the six other vendors similarly employed in a defined portion of the town in which they work. This could be a culture that 'lives' for just the period when the family members deal with the vendor. If this was a longer period of time, then the

researcher would decide how long the operational time would be. (Of course, bits of the culture could migrate and live on in other small culture formations.)

But how can I say what I've just said in brackets? Doesn't saying that bits of a culture could migrate imply that cultures as separate entities really exist, so that things can pass between them?

The clues are expressed in the diagram. The operational culture, created by the researcher or whoever is looking, is marked by the dark bubble. However, as explained on the right of the diagram, what happens to be inside this arbitrary bubble has all the features of culture - structures of interaction that people, wherever they come into contact, construct and are organised by. Wherever the boundaries are drawn, culture as an uncountable will be found. In this sense there is certainly something real that we can call 'culture' as an uncountable. In other words, something we can call 'culture' is taking place wherever there are people interacting. Operationally, 'a culture' is any slice or segment of this that we as researchers, or anyone else who is looking, define for the sake of looking. In this sense, any of us may also wish operationally to define 'cultures' for all sorts of reasons - perhaps for the purpose of asserting the identity of a particular group of people - institutions, professions, departments, sports teams, and so on.

'Small cultures' are therefore all operationally defined segments of the wider real activity of culture. Culture everywhere is a seamless extent of human activity. Small cultures are bits of this extent of culture - bits of culture. They really are like, therefore, the slices of the biological world that we put under a microscope and call 'cultures'. And whichever slice we look at we will see culture taking place. Different slices, 'small cultures', will, on the one hand, have particular characteristics because they are from different places in the uncountable whole.

Slicing and segmenting the seamless cultural whole can undoubtedly have an impact on actual behaviour where the purpose is, successfully, to establish. In the example above, of bits of a family, and a vendor and some people associated with her business, if the purpose is to call that 'a business' with a big B, or 'a company', and its customers, this may well impact on the behaviour of at least some of the people concerned through a process of institutionalisation, professionalisation, perhaps even setting up a 'community of practice'.

On the other hand, the slices and segments, wherever they come from, will all share the common material of culture wherever we find it - i.e. the underlying universal cultural processes that feature at the centre of my grammar of culture.

Going back to the question, therefore, of how possible it is to work up in the demarcation of separate 'cultures' from small to large - well, it is simply



that the bigger the operational slicing or segmenting, the greater the ideological adventure, or imposition.

All 'cultures', small or big, are therefore socially constructed for small or big intentions, with varying degrees of impact and success.

### [53] So what do we mean by intercultural?

Issues with culture 7/16

The intercultural is to do with interaction between people with different cultural experience. This difference is more obvious where the experience is markedly divergent as a result of histories, grand narratives and practices that are specific to particular societies with their economies, political systems, geographies and events. The particularities of societies can make us very different to each other in many ways dependent on where we were brought up and come from on a global scale.

However, the intercultural is also to do with the movement between small cultures which is common to all societies. Our common experience in small culture formation provides us with the experience and skills to move through and between societies. Small culture formation on the go is at the core of these experiences and skills. On the go refers to the transient nature of small cultures, which is a microcosm of the longer-term transience of larger societies.

Therefore, while current interests in the intercultural are to do with people travelling across nations, the core of the intercultural is in the everyday movement between small cultures that is common to all of us.

Thinking about intercultural in this bottom-up way does not help us to define, predict or explain the behaviour of national or ethnic large cultures. This is not the purpose at all of thinking about the intercultural within a non-essentialist, postmodern paradigm. Instead, the purpose is to help us make sense of the world around us wherever we find it. It is therefore more akin to a sociology of culture or cultural studies.

Intercultural training will not therefore be a matter of preparing people for how to behave in specific ways when encountering specific cultures. Instead, it is to do with understanding how culture and society works and how to find the threads in our own experiences that can connect with those of others, and how to be wary of the narratives, ideologies and discourses that get in the way of these threads.

## [54] Researching with others - slices and segments

Issues with culture 10/16

When we carry out research, or, indeed, when we do anything with someone from another group of people - teaching, learning from, collaborating with, helping to mediate conflict with, selling to, buying from - we are somehow bringing along slices or segments of culture that we are associated with and abutting them with slices or segments of culture that they are associated

There are several things that need to be remembered in this respect:

[1] These slices or segments are operationally formed. They have become very real to us and other people concerned. Indeed, they are perhaps important bases for our identities and providing recipes for action - small cultures in every sense of the term, with all their regulatory and sense-making features. However, they are constructed, reconstructed, and reified for the purpose of operation.

[2] The people we are approaching are also involved in something similar. While we might be categorising them as the group of people we want to research, the boundaries that are important to them, that connect with the small culture formation that they are involved in, may be very different.

Because the 'real culture' swirls between us and connects us all together, or, at least, gives us all a common base of human experience, whatever is in our operational small cultures, there will be stuff going on that the people we engage with, from the point of view of their own operational small cultures, will be able to recognise.

Imagine therefore this train for thought passing in some degree through the mind of someone who is being interviewed - not forgetting that there will also be a lot of other things passing through their minds from all the other preoccupations and events that they are involved with.

Oh yes, I can sort of see what's going on here. Yes, I also know what it's like to have a task to do with rules set by other people but that I'm trying hard to make my own. This researcher wants to look formal and at the same time open - aware that she might be imposing, or appear imposing, but also wanting me to be myself and feel comfortable enough to intervene, but not too much, of course.

This ability to share and - but perhaps 'share' is the wrong word.

Oh, yes, but, I really don't want to get into having to share anything about the process. I've enough of that in my own life already. Just ask me the questions and let me go.

Better to say appreciate. This is not only because of existing experience of the workings of our own small cultures, some of which we might indeed share - being members of a family, being employees in a company, being students - but because we also have experience of the operational part - the 'on the go' part.

This must be the case even if we are interviewing or whatever with people from very different societies. At a certain level there will also be this shared experience. These sorts of operational negotiations of small culture membership and how we deal with it are universal.

## [55] Stepping outside the literal

How it is possible to write 10/16

Writing with another person is a wonderful thing to do when thoughts match across space, time, personal background and experience. It takes care of a lot of the 'How is it possible to write?' need to reflect out loud - which has been a purpose of this blog. But one can't speak to one's co-writer whenever one wants because we all have the rest of our lives to get on with. And sometimes both of you need to go elsewhere to sort things out.

Writing this blog therefore now has an extra audience - everyone out there who might be interested plus my co-writer. It's like showing to her what I am writing to others. All these different levels and types of sense making.

So here I am - and I get this phrase from my co-writer. Here I am, still stuck in a paragraph, having moved something from one place to another, and having worked out that there are very different alternative interpretations of a particular piece of data, and that part of the important thing to write is that there *are* two interpretations, at least, and why these are important to write about.

What makes writing particularly difficult is leaving behind the literal meaning of things. Nothing is accepted at face value. In this case there is an interview, and it's no longer even clear that we the interviewers can just look at them the people we are interviewing and summarise what they say. This is not just 'political correctness gone mad' but a genuine desire to get to the bottom of what's going on between people.

## [56] Writing out of sense-making

How it is possible to write 10/16

We co-writers spend weeks trying to work out between us what is going on in an interview that we are both taking part in. We talk and look and read and listen again and again and again. We unravel our own thinking and learn more about what might be going on with the people we are researching. We discover how we have been cautious to raise issues that the other might disagree with. And then we discover how much we agree and think alike when we didn't think we did. We cross large spaces to find each other's thinking. And then suddenly there is almost a text that we both almost like. We both write into it. The laying bare of making sense takes us to new understandings. It is then worth the time that we spend. And we hope that the text will sustain.

## [57] The final forming

How it is possible to write 10/16

Then, when you have a text that you almost like, it needs the final forming - shaving, cutting, sharpening, bringing down to the size that fits. The bringing together of the total form into a whole single body. Designing it for the reader. And in doing this you may find more meaning and understanding. You may need to go back again before you can go forward.

So many images and memories continue to come into this process. The last time other readers saw and judged your text. What they seemed to miss and what you found you had not said. The times you spoke to audiences and joined discussions, and what they took and what they didn't. Even small comments in coffee queues. The turns of phrase that worked, the odd scribbles. Even the advice of long since teachers and elders - telling you where to leave in and take out commas, where you said too much and left too little. Philosophers talking about scripts. Ancient texts with notes in margins. Exercise books with lines and and squares. Inkwells and blots. And, today, screens, fonts and windows join the fascination. And then, sometimes, the huge emptiness when you cannot even look at the text for days.

So back to the co-writer for reassurance. Back to the blog to find clarity. Back to the café to watch people. Back to old Khayyám and the moving finger.

## [58] Writing new thinking

How it is possible to write 10/16

One of my colleagues noted my reference to Omar Khayyám at the end of my last blog - ‘The moving finger writes, and having writ, moves on’, and about not being able to ‘cancel half a line’. The past cannot be changed. But in the process of writing about it, one’s thinking certainly can change.

There are so many layers in the brief interview events we are writing about; and taking the time necessary to edit continues to reveal more - not only about what is going on with the people we are talking to, but also what we learn about ourselves as researchers, what *we* are doing in the conversation, and what we therefore need to do in the future.

The transcript of the interview is only the beginning. In writing about it so much more comes into view. Seeing all of us in the interview as small culture formation on the go is liberating and disciplining. The close editing of what we can say about the interview comes down to the deep nuances of the nature of evidence, and prejudice, and what can be claimed. But it also takes in what we are able to know about a wider world.

Sorting out ‘grand narratives’ from ‘personal narratives’ from discourses may seem inconsequential theorising. Sorting the winks from the twitches in Geertz’s terms. But this *is* getting to the bottom of things; and it *does* help us unravel the deep architecture of cultural prejudice.

And then, one of the people we interviewed walks by at the very moment that I’m struggling with the text. We talk about it, as much as I can say, just for a moment. It was a year and a half ago. She may have long forgotten what she said. But I am reminded about her being a person among other people. And the text of the interview becomes even more related to all the other things that are happening; and that becomes part of the unravelling.

## [59] Multiple locations for research

Issues with culture 4/17

A few days ago Mehri and I visited an estate agent because we are trying to sell our apartment. We were contemplating getting into an ‘authentic country living’ situation, as one of the signs on the wall said, as we felt that the move from an apartment to a house would be better for us at this stage. We decided we’re not too worried about where we move because our friend recently told us about a company that can move your vehicle for you. If anyone else is moving across the country, you could always ‘check it out’, as another sign said, to see

if you need this service too. This means we don't have to worry about staying within a certain mileage from our current home because they can deliver our car to us regardless.

We have lived in our apartment for quite some time so we know it's going to be a big transition moving from one place to the next, especially with the amount of belongings we have accumulated over the years. I don't want to rush into buying a house as I want it to be our dream house. We both have a list of criteria that needs to be met and I don't want to have to compromise. We have even had a look at some 'apartments for rent in Doha' just in case our apartment sells before we find a new home. We're excited to be setting up our lives elsewhere but we are also preparing for a tough couple of months!

The person we had an appointment to meet was late at the first house, so we were invited to sit and wait for about twenty minutes. During this time there was so much to look at - the work environment, how the space was organised in a new building, what people had on their desks, the way they were dressed, how they walked about and addressed each other, elements of power relations and networking, what there was on the table in front of us, how their brochures were organised, what images they used to sell their business, what sorts of images and content they felt would help to do this, generally how they presented themselves to the outside world. It was interesting, but if I were to do it again I think I'd rather speak to someone called Charlotte from 'Essex Homes' after hearing how they managed to make a friend of ours comfortable during their house-hunting situation.

After a while, another employee came and sat with us. It was interesting how he presented himself, how he made us feel comfortable (which he may not have done!), how it was possible to get him into small talk. But it wasn't small talk at all. As a researcher I was trying to find out from him what the rules were for consuming refreshments in the workplace. I'd noted that there were no coffee tumblers on desks and that no-one was walking around with them as they did all the time in the university. I shared this with him for a moment to see how he responded. He had asked us if we wanted some refreshments; so there was a way in. A lot could be learnt from what he said and how he said it - about identity, culture and power. It was even possible to get into what sort of work discourses he had to deal with. When the other person finally arrived there was a lot to notice about how they interacted with each other - how apologies and the the possible embarrassment of how he had covered for her were managed. Gender management in a social climate where we are supposed to be so careful was certainly there to be watched.

This might all sound too much - getting on with researching even at important times like going to the estate agent to negotiate the life-changing event

of moving house. But researchers can't avoid doing this. In fact I think that everyone does this all the time anyway - the natural phenomenology that Alfred Schutz reminds us we all do as 'strangers' to the things around us in order to get on with life. As researchers we externalise these natural processes.

Of particular importance to me, is that it did help me to work out what to say next in what I was writing, which has nothing at all to do with estate agents. But surely, if we are doing research that has anything at all to do with people, we can find elements of this wherever we look. Writing in public places like cafés and libraries is not just because we can drink the coffee, but also because these places and others keep us alive to what is going on with people everywhere.

Also, I am both observing and taking part in small culture formation on the go. It helps me not just to write but to work out my own social tasks. It is crossing the boundaries between the familiar and the strange. It helps me to go and get my expenses refund in the bank in Doha; and that experience helps me to talk to the people in the estate agents and to find the intercultural threads to get a little bit into their world which is a foreign to me as the bank in Doha. And perhaps speaking to them also helps me to get through the day in my own workplace.

Just writing this also helps me to sort out my thinking. I thought about it two days ago; and now I manage to find the moment to write it.

## [60] The value of painful review

How it is possible to write 4/17

Following the theme that something can be made of everything. My co-author and I have just finished revising another article. As is often the case when trying to break new ground, one of the reviews is negative. 'What is the point of this paper? It doesn't seem to make any worthwhile contribution.'

However, once we have got over the initial anger, good things can come out of it. I hope that this can also apply to difficult vivas and research review meetings.

The important question to ask is: 'Why didn't this particular audience understand what we were trying to say?' It is then that the interesting stuff can begin. When we look in detail through the text that we submitted, we discover a number of things we didn't see before. We are looking with new eyes now - the imagined eyes of that audience that didn't understand us. It is indeed true that we didn't actually explicitly make the points that we thought that we had.

Sometimes the points aren't there at all. Sometimes they're in places where they don't make sense, or not in the places where they would make sense.

Then, when we put in the points that we had forgotten to make, other things begin to emerge - new relationships and connections that had not been clear before. Moving things around, thinking laterally about the text, brings new thinking and takes us forward to new places. We end up with a new title and a new core idea. It's not easy. It might not come right until the fourth, fifth or sixth edit. But immensely worth all the work.

So thank you to that negative reviewer. Without you we wouldn't have a better article with improved and even new ideas!

## [61] 'In my mind's eye'

How it is possible to write 7/17

'In my mind's eye' is a common expression that I heard my parents' generation use, which means, I think, imagining visual images or 'seeing' ideas and arguments. I experienced an excellent example of this recently at a seminar for doctoral research supervisors. Most of the event was quite remarkably paperless and apparently they keep all their documents safely stored online so that they don't have to be printed. In the workshops and the plenary sessions I attended PowerPoint or flip charts weren't used at all.

There was one particular session which I found quite remarkable. Two colleagues presented ideas about the structure of the thesis. They sat side by side and spoke quite freely, though at the same time with huge precision. The first one spoke about his experience of an experimental design, and said that this was well represented by one of several models that his colleague, sitting next to him, had found on the internet. The colleague had it on the screen of his iPad which was facing him on the table. The first speaker was able to look over and also see it. The conversation between them went something like this, as they both looked at the screen that the audience couldn't see:

Yes, there it is. It has an introduction, a context chapter, three experiments and a conclusion.

And there's also a second model here, which I suppose is for the humanities, in which there is an introduction and then three themes.

Of course they could have just talked about the two models without looking at the screen. But somehow, certainly for me, them looking at the screen



that I couldn't see pushed them into a way of talking that enabled the conjuring of rich visual images.

Earlier in my career I was entirely dependent on overhead transparencies. Before it was possible to laser print transparencies they were hand written and drawn. But I also remember going to an international conference in the early 80s at which there was an outcry from many of the delegates against the use of transparencies in presentations. The conference organised had to make a plenary statement about the need to be tolerant. In the mid 90s I was invited to do a lecture tour in Pakistan. At one location there weren't the facilities for projecting transparencies; and for the first time I had to just speak from notes. It was a liberating experience; and a colleague who was travelling with me said that it was good to see me talking to the audience instead of to the display screen.

I now try to be strategic about whether I use PowerPoint, a handout or just speak from notes. It depends on the audience, it's size, the nature of the event and so on. But perhaps it shouldn't be when not to use PowerPoint, as though it's the default. Perhaps it should be when to use PowerPoint - working up from the fewest possible slides and which one's really need to be seen.

However, the most comfortable position when using PowerPoint - after a lot of trying different things - is to have the notes I would talk to if I didn't use PowerPoint on the PowerPoint screen. This simplifies the focus of my attention in what I want to say. So, basically, for me, it's as minimal as possible notes that work - sometimes just to speak from, sometimes also on a handout, sometimes on PowerPoint slides.

## [62] The location of argument and the connecting of sentences

How it is possible to write 8/17

I have been lucky enough to get a contract for a second edition of my last book<sup>8</sup>, with a remit to completely re-frame the text to make it more readable. It will be a more traditional, prose-based, academic text. *However*, I am also intent on a reference-free text that is more accessible.

In the previous version I put all the 'literature review' in a final 'epilogue' chapter. In this version I'm creating footnotes in which I say where concepts come from and who is discussing them. So, for example, when I am talking about interculturality, I can put in the footnote that this has been discussed by

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<sup>8</sup> Now published as *Understanding intercultural communication: negotiating a grammar of culture*, 2nd edition, Routledge 2018.

so and so who suggest this and that about it. Something similar for essentialism, Othering, hybridity, and so on, where I cannot claim to have sole ownership of the concepts.

I'm just trying this out at the moment to see how it works. However, I am finding it a liberating experience because I can focus on what I'm trying to say. This means that I don't quote anyone else in the main part of the text. I only use my own sentences; and they have to work all by themselves.

Making my sentences work is all about getting the ideas and the connections between them organised in the right sequences. This can sometimes require pulling whole paragraphs and even sections from other chapters. It's sometimes tough going; but eventually getting there is a wonderful thing - at least for a time. How, for example, does that discourse relate to this paradigm and that ideology and what these people that I have interviewed have to say. It's all data driven because I relate everything to reconstructed ethnographic narratives, which are themselves based on interviews and observed behaviour.

At the core, therefore, is observed social life. In the footnotes are references to broader debates. These might be the equivalent to data chapters and literature review in traditional research writing. But the *substance* of the whole thing is, on the basis of this evidence, what I have to say - my argument. And I can now see far more clearly exactly where my argument is located and what it needs to look like.

One of the reasons for writing this particular blog is to address what I see in so many student dissertations, and the awful struggles that students have to put them together. I wonder if, because there is so much focus on the main content being the literature and the data, plus I suppose the methodology, the students' own argument is left to survive in bits and pieces in between these blocks. Very often this argument is hardly visible at all.

What I am feeling good about, just at this particular moment, is that I've found a significant place, and mode, for my own argument. Then comes the struggle with the actual sentences and how they connect - but at least they are all my own sentences.

## [63] Why we should stop using native-non-native speaker labels

Issues with culture 11/17

This blog responds to queries after my recent presentation at the BALEAP seminar at Nottingham Trent University. Why do we need to stop using the

native-non-native speaker labels? Are they really neo-racist; and what does 'neo-racist' mean? Are there no occasion when these labels can be used?

One reason for not using native-non-native speaker labels is that we don't need them and can do better without them. I do not believe that 'native speakers' and 'non-native speakers' actually exist outside the particular popular and academic discourses that produce the labels. People who speak languages in different ways, with different histories, and with varying degrees of competence in different settings exist all around us. These labels can never do justice to this complexity. If we discipline ourselves not to use the labels we will be forced into a more thoughtful discourse in which some of the politics of how we think about the use of language might become evident. A lot of writing that I see would not lose anything at all and would indeed be enriched without the labels. Years of normalisation and reification of the labels has created an easy, uncritical shorthand that has got us nowhere but a between-the-lines encouragement of prejudice.

But what about the common-sense argument that the labels are common, innocent phrases in our everyday language which do relate to real types of people and language use that we recognise when we meet them? This argument is exemplified in the sentence, 'If I want someone to teach my children Russian I will look for a native speaker because they know the real Russian language'.

I could easily have said that myself. But when I really think about the sentence I begin to see that 'native speaker' is not an objective category. When I search into what I actually mean, I discover some sort of idealisation. It should not be *any* Russian, but one who fits the image that I have in my mind - perhaps appearance, skin colour, class, accent, name, demeanour, or an image from literature or film. It relates to the branded, exoticised and packaged, 'us'-'them' slices of so-called 'culture' that one can find in commercial textbooks and that we might have been brought up with since primary school.

Regarding academia, just because scholars have been using the native-non-native speaker labels for a long time is not enough reason for continuing to use them in the future. The established use of 'native speaker' as a sociolinguistic category comes from particular paradigmatic discourses of science and is not fixed beyond critical scrutiny. We would have a more thoughtful science if the labels were scrapped.

So what exactly is the 'between-the-lines encouragement of prejudice' that is implicit in the native-non-native speaker labels? Here we need to look at the native-speakerism argument - that the labels are underpinned by an ideology that constructs people who we label as 'non-native speakers' as culturally deficient. This ideology is widespread. It is forged in the everyday talk that touches

on language and cultural identity and in the scholarly articles that represent an imagined objective 'science', and then celebrated in the supposedly innocent talk of language teaching professions.

The core element of that makes this ideology problematic is neo-racism. I have looked again at some of the literature from which I and others get this term. It refers to a deep and unrecognised racism that this both implicit and hidden in what seem to be innocent descriptions of national and ethnic cultural difference. That these descriptions often claim to protect and celebrate what is definitive about these 'cultures' drives the implicit racism even further between the lines. They are racist because they define, confine and reduce groups of people. Moreover, it is the critical literature about native-non-native speaker labels that shows us that they bring with them references to culture that evoke images of deficiency or superiority - divisive associations with competence, knowledge and race - who can, who can't, and what sort of people they are.

It is therefore the case that the labels themselves are problematic because of what they evoke. The people who use them might have innocent intentions, as I did with my sentence about 'native speakers' of Russian; but there are racist implications between the lines that we cannot escape from no matter what our personal intentions.

One attempted solution has been to ban the use of native-non-native speaker labels when they are obviously discriminatory, for example in job adverts and employment practices. This is effective to a degree. The implication is that we can then go ahead with using the labels when they are not discriminatory. This doesn't work though because of the between-the-lines nature of the issue all the other times that we use the labels. Also, thinking that we've solved the problem in one domain makes us more complacent in other domains.

Another attempted solution has been to find alternative labels. This also doesn't work because the problem is with the nature of the difference that is being evoked, regardless of the words that are being used. One sure way of perpetuating the damage is to use acronyms (NNS, NS, NNEST, NEST and so on), or to shorten the labels to 'native' or 'non-native'. This serves simply to push the labelling even further into a normalised, reified discourse, where we are even less likely to reflect on their meaning, and where a technicalisation of the labels somehow makes them more legitimate.

We should only ever use the labels when we are critically discussing their impact as items of discourse, and never as though they refer to actual, real groups of people. This is not the same as using sexist labels for gender or the equivalent for other groups. What the native-non-native speaker labels refer to

do not actually exist at all. The whole thing is either the product of or convenient material for native-speakerism.

## [64] Reference to native-non-native speaker labels in research

How it is possible to write 2/18

I have said publicly that I'm not prepared to review any journal submissions that use the native-non-native speaker labels without critical discussion of them. This set me thinking when and when not it would be appropriate to use the labels in research - and to come up with the following. It is also to do with how to write about contested issues.

Whenever the core concept that you are writing about is contested you cannot treat it as though it isn't. Also, you can't say that it's contested and how and why it's contested and then proceed to use it in the rest of your paper as though it isn't. I've seen so many pieces of writing that do this. It's as though the initial critique is only there because the writer is going through the motions of literature review without really understanding it.

You can critique the constructed, imagined concepts of native-non-native speaker labelling. You can research the nature of the construction of the native-non-native speaker labels.

What you cannot do is research the characteristics of 'native' and 'non-native speakers' because these groups don't actually exist except as ideological constructions. You can't research what students think about 'native' and 'non-native speakers' teachers because these teachers don't actually exist except as ideological constructions.

You can however research what students think about what they *imagine* are 'native' and 'non-native speaker' teachers. If you do that, however, you should continue to remind yourself and your readers that you are dealing with imagined constructions and not actual groups. You are employing a constructivist approach; and you need to show that you understand what that is.

You can't research anything do to with a sample of 'native' or 'non-native speakers' because there's no way you can determine who is and who isn't. You can't even talk about a sample of people who are labelled 'native' or 'non-native speaker' without spending a lot of time getting into who is doing the labelling and on what basis. This would quite likely get into problematic struggles with equally subjective categories such as 'white'. You can however research people who *say* that they're labelled as 'native speakers' or 'non-native speakers'.

You can't research your own experience of being a 'native' or 'non-native speaker' because you can't be a member of a group that doesn't actually exist except as an ideological construct. You can however research your experience of being *labelled* 'native' or 'non-native speaker'. You are then discussing what it's like to be victim of the labelling.

## [65] Being focused

How it is possible to write 7/18

The space in the morning is such an important thing to have. It used to be the case that I could just get up and write for half an hour, and that set me up for the day. These days it seems more complex. And for a while I've understood those people who say that they need at least a week of free time get into their writing. I've been finishing other things off and allowing bits and pieces of 'admin work' to get in the way.

However, a few days ago I managed to get something back. There has to be one main project - a book, a dissertation, an article, or whatever. You have to keep it in your mind the whole time, so that you are thinking about it and working on it in between and even at the same time as all the other things you are doing. This doesn't necessarily mean sitting and staring at the screen with it. In fact, the whole point is not to do that.

It was actually going to be a busy Monday morning. I had a PhD review meeting at 9.00, and then an appraisal meeting with my line manager. The second meeting was going to be stressful; so it wasn't an easy prospect. Nevertheless, between perhaps six thirty and seven fifteen I got a lot done. I searched for something in my emails which at first seemed like distraction, but found it. Then I went to the chapter of the book I am writing, which I *had* been staring at in the screen in previous days and not getting anywhere. Then the idea came and I was able to think of something I hadn't before and then move a heading, change a few sentences, cut and paste something - suddenly there was amazing clarity. I even realised that searching for the email had helped with that.

I haven't yet been back to it on the screen; and it's Thursday. But it's been in my head ever since. It was certainly between the lines of what I said to the PhD student in the review meeting. It was there in the review of a journal article I had to write. It was there in some of the questions I asked and the sense that I made of the replies in the two gruelling days of interviewing PhD candidates. It was even there in getting through the appraisal meeting, and also in internal dialogues with TV dramas that I've watched. It was certainly there in

what I said to my PhD student in a supervision meeting just now. That's why it's so important to meet with my students regularly. They give me so many ideas.

Well, now I'm writing this instead of getting back to the text; but writing this is definitely on the way to getting back to it. And, of course, sitting in the café and watching what's going on is crucial material.

The whole point is that when I get back to it on the screen just a little time will make a lot of difference. But of course, it will take some determination to do that.

## [66] Achieving interculturality

Issues with culture 7/18

This is the last section, page 179, from the new edition of my book,<sup>9</sup>. It should be coming out in the New Year.

Safa is a character from one of my reconstructed ethnographic narratives; and I think that what she has been able to do in these narratives is what I would stand by as a definition of interculturality.

In many ways, Safa achieves all the suggestions of this book in how she carries out and manages cultural innovation. This does not mean that cultural innovation is the main aim; but being able to be innovative in the way that she does reflects important aspects of interculturality. She demonstrates the deeper nature of what can be achieved by individual people in dialogue with the larger particular social and political structures across cultural locations. She employs multiple cultural resources both from her home and new cultural environments. Each set of resources is enhanced by the other, especially in cases where she understands something about the inner workings of cultural practices as they adapt themselves to innovation.

Regarding global positioning and politics, she engages with her own opinions and the opinions of others that reflect the values associated with the cultural practices that concern her. Despite being positioned as non-Western or Westernised by others, she is able to negotiate and counter this positioning and find herself within it. She nevertheless faces prejudices, and how far she is able to overcome them remains to be seen as her personal cultural trajectory continues into the future.

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<sup>9</sup> Understanding intercultural communication: negotiating a grammar of culture, 2nd edition, Routledge 2018.

In her personal cultural trajectory, Safa has travelled and come to terms with living in a new cultural environment. She has carried cultural preferences from her home environment and eventually learnt how to revive and develop aspects of them in her new environment. She has also acquired a critical liking for cultural practices encountered in the new environment and found ways to carry them back and integrate them into her original cultural environment. This has enabled her to develop a greater ethnographic awareness of her home environment. Her personal cultural identity therefore develops backwards and forwards across cultural locations.

Enacting small culture formation on the go, Safa does not simply adopt or reject new cultural practices or try to introduce cultural practices from her home environment. Finding a way to engage with new practices in both environments on her own terms leads her into analysis of how they operate and to become skilful in establishing her position. Artefacts play a significant role in the cultural innovation with which Safa engages - restaurant bills, credit cards, specialist language, the development of discourses, the media, fruit, mugs and iPods. Her statements about culture also become more expansive. There is therefore no culture loss, but instead a deeper understanding and appreciation of the value of the heritage that she brings with her.

And there is more ...

The new edition is written in a very different way to the first one in that it is written to be read and contains lots of new thinking - especially where it deals with multiculturalism, hybridity and the third space.

## [67] Cultural rhythms

Issues with culture 9/18

I recently went to a conference in Venice. Walking through the narrow streets for the business of getting to and from the conference site drew my attention again to walking rhythms. Where they were major routes for tourists I found I was bumping into people, they were stopping in front of me without warning, causing me to almost fall over small children, people weren't moving aside when I walked up behind them and wanted to pass, and so on. Later I talked to Italian colleagues who lived there, who complained about the same thing. In a largely pedestrianised city, they said that they needed to walk fast to go about their business and were constantly stopped from doing this by crowds of tourists.



I have often found, when I am in a foreign place - in the first week when I go to Iran - that I'm not with the rhythm of how people walk in the street. I find the same when I'm walking in a narrow pavement at home when there are people walking in front of me who have recently arrived, probably as students or tourists. They don't sense me and don't move aside to let me pass. When I'm in Iran the problem stops as I somehow pick up the rhythm of the people around me. It takes about three days of going out and walking around. I remember when I first went there it was much worse. My finger nails and clothes got dirty because I was also touching and brushing against the physical environment. After a week this stopped happening.

Readers might experiment with this. Try walking up behind people to pass them and see if they intuitively notice you and move aside. If you share the same rhythm it works. If you don't it doesn't. Even in huge crowds, you will walk amongst people more easily when the rhythm is shared.

This is very clearly something cultural in the sense that it's to do with how groups of people interact with each other. It also connects with certain types of quite deep cultural practices such as which finger you hold up to signal 'one', whether you dispense salt from the receptacle with one or many holes, how you use or don't use knives, forks and spoons, how shops are organised in streets, whether basil is a food or something to repel mosquitoes, whether you cook lots of food in case guests come or just enough so as not to be wasteful, whether or not you show the soles of your feet to people, which parts of your body you cover and when, and so on.

These are a mixture of self-conscious and deeply tacit things; and some of them connect with values. They are indeed things that constitute cultural difference, and can be specific to country, religion, nation, and large cultural things like that. Yes, you can sometimes work out very broadly where people come from by the way they walk and the body language they use.

However, we need to be cautious here. As with the very deep and tacit matter of rhythms of walking in the street, all of these cultural things can be learnt by newcomers, even the deep values that some of these practices may represent. This surely means that we should not use such things to populate essentialist cultural descriptions. Whatever people might think of such things in terms of how they define themselves, this is a matter of choice rather than a confinement. I might define myself, my identity, everything about myself by what sort of clothes I wear. But that's my choice; and I can always change my mind, change how I define myself.

However, saying that this is a large culture thing might just be a convenience - a framing that we have got used to because of methodological nationalism. There are other things. I personally get the same sort of feeling of disjunc-

ture when reading British tabloid news items - when I just cannot understand the logic of the flow and ordering of information and story line. After no longer having a senior administration position for a year, I get the same feeling when trying to read university management documents. Recently I couldn't get past the first line. And of course throughout my university career I've found the same thing trying to communicate with other departments, where there are clearly different discourses that carry different narratives that can make communication difficult.

Of course, in the latter cases, I would learn the different rhythms to get the job done. Learning other discourses to work with people across boundaries is an important part of being effective. You don't need prior descriptions of their 'cultures'; you just need to understand how discourses and how they carry narratives operate. A basic sociology of knowledge. A basic sociology of small culture formation on the go.

Perhaps I got a lot of this understanding doing sociology at university. I would imagine that studying literature or media - and others - might also have done this. Given good teachers perhaps. Or perhaps being an outsider during childhood - always looking in to try and work out what was going on around me. But this didn't prevent me from falling into awful traps of prejudice when I first went to Iran. Is there a problem with so-called intercultural awareness training when it focuses on cultural products rather than the common workings of social processes? Just a query.

Returning to the conference in Venice, the main delegates were Japanese teachers. I have never been with so many Japanese people in one place before. The most important thing to note, in my view, was that after a very short time I was just with conference delegates. Even though I couldn't understand overheard conversations, I could sense a lot of what groups of teachers and researchers were thinking, talking about, noting down and so on. I was lucky enough to have an interpreter. When she told me some key things about what was happening in Japanese medium presentations, there was so much that was familiar.

One of the Italian colleagues I met there who was learning Japanese told me that she found the characters liberating. Sometimes we can appreciate rhythms which, though foreign, speak to us in ways that make us find something new about ourselves. Perhaps we can also enliven these rhythms with those that we bring with us.

## [68] The man in the café

Issues with culture 9/18

An interesting example of what we might call 'cultural difference' is the man coming into the café where I am sitting in Canterbury who orders an espresso at the counter, stirs in the sugar with particular panache and then drinks the coffee there and then without sitting down, and leaves. Yes, he speaks Italian to someone. This resonates with the attention I attracted among friends in Italy because I drink my espresso slowly and say that I can make it last for an hour. I therefore presume he's Italian. But of course he might not be.

If I say 'Italians drink their espresso straight down', I am using an expressive, even poetic form, to indicate something that I've seen and which might even appeal to me. But I must never let the statement run away with me and become something more than it is. The practice might change. Next time I go to Italy I might see some Italians drinking their espressos more slowly. That could happen. For all sorts of reasons, practices can change. But the main point is that I have no right to define Italians by such statements because to do so would be to try to reduce them. Moreover, 'Italians' can never be more than an approximate term for a people who are as complex and varied as 'we' are.

Perhaps the man in the café reminds me of some sort of idealised image I have - Marcello Mastroianni or Franco Nero. Italians who don't like that image must please excuse me. Even if they like this imagery, this is what it must remain. Homi Bhabha explains the complexity of why very well. Although I really don't want to get into literature review in these blogs, I think here that I have no choice.

An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness ... it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition. Likewise the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated ... that needs no proof can never really, in discourse, be proved.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, to think of the image of the man in the café and the other images he conjures as a stereotype, rather than a poetic recollection, celebration or appreciation, would be an act of colonisation.

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<sup>10</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The location of culture*, Routledge 1994, pages 94-95

If we stereotype ourselves we are buying into the colonised image of who we are. If we use the stereotype of ourselves for strategic purpose that's a different matter; but we mustn't be seduced into believing it.

## [69] New storyline, more ideas and new findings

How it is possible to write 1/19

I met with my co-author a few weeks ago to take a good look at the draft text of our book. We had already 45,000 words of the 50,000 target; but a pile of interviews, analyses, discussions of theory, reconstructed ethnographic accounts, interesting though all of them were, was really just a mishmash of stuff.

It conformed to our original proposal, but was topic-based rather than argument-based. There had been massive breakthroughs and new thinking, which had led us to collect data and make huge points that we hadn't thought of before. This creative exploration had taken us into new areas. We had ambitious hunches that what we were writing was really important and breaking boundaries.

However, this was not enough. We needed to think about our readers and what they would make of it. We felt that, because they could not be inside our minds, they would make little sense of what we were trying to say.

Writing a book, like a thesis, or like other creative acts, is a major opportunity. A publisher, a university, perhaps project funders, or other types of sponsors, have given us a space within which we can say something important. This might seem a negative thing to say; but there are so many books, theses, project reports and so on that cover ground and somehow do the job, but miss the opportunity to say something impactful. This is because they don't really manage to go the extra mile and really speak to readers.

I recently received a new book in the post because I wrote an endorsement for it. The author might read this and recognise the reference. Just looking at the title already speaks to me in a way that transports me to another exciting place. Just the title!

Well, life is short; and my co-author and I decided that we had to take radical action to turn our draft into something that speaks. (Is this a good distinction between speaking and just talking?) Speaking out - saying something important and transporting. We just couldn't waste the opportunity by letting all that work go without whipping it into something to be really read.

We had to work out exactly who our audience is. I'm thinking also about all the PhD students I have encountered who don't really get this, unfortunately.

We had both attended seminars and conferences, read widely, and reviewed other people's work. This meant that we had met lots of people, either in face-to-face or on paper. We had to pull out of that experience a sense of real audience.

So we found, over a couple of days, some vacant classrooms with table space. We also went to cafés and walked around and talked. What was really useful was scribbling on pieces of paper and then moving them around. The table space was crucial for that. This was during a few days after a conference we had both attended. So we had the people we had just met and what they had said and what we had thought about them as a very fresh set of memories to help focus our thoughts. This really helped us to position ourselves - to position what we wanted to say - what we wanted to say to those people we had just met, with whom we had had conversations either in our minds while listening to their presentations, or in actually talking to them.

Well I'm really lucky to have a great co-author with whom I can do this sort of thing. We complement each other really well. Again, thinking of lone PhD students, I have also gone through this process by myself with books that I have written in the past. I also need to say that the degree of success has been variable. I have written books that have involved huge amounts of work that have not been resounding successes. However, knowing that one might not actually reach the intended standards does not mean that one shouldn't try. Not to do the final work of re-framing a text so that it can speak to an audience is a massive, massive waste.

So that's what we did. However, that's not the end of the story - just moving things around to create a better storyline that will speak to an audience.

In doing that, we came up with a whole new set of ideas about what the book is actually about. Just by looking at existing material and moving it around automatically brings the need to make new connections. New connections bring new ideas.

Late at night at the end of the first day we continued to text each other possible new titles for the book. We needed a new title to match the new ideas we had found. The next day we met again and worked on those, and looked back at the bits of paper, and moved them around again, and scribbled more, and thought more about the people we had met and the conversations we had had with them.

Thinking again about going through this process alone. With a particular book I have written which *has* been successful, I was really lucky enough to have a colleague browse the draft. He actually suggested a title that I hadn't thought of. It was just that title that made me, just a month before submission, completely reorganise the whole text and write in new connections. Speaking

again to PhD students, it is so important to get someone else to read - not a proofreader, but someone who is going through a similar process to you. Also, for them, reading your work will help them to sort out their own ideas and writing.

A week later we had a Skype meeting with our publisher and rehearsed the title with her. Amazingly, she liked it.

Now there is the major task of the actual writing that is needed to reorganise the text and put in the new connections that make the new points and communicate the new ideas. Most of this is with the first, introductory chapter. This writing talk in itself continues to bring new ideas. Simply having to write a new paragraph that connects two apparently discordant ideas will generate something very new.

Again, thinking of PhD students. Many writers don't really get down to the detail of making sure that a single paragraph speaks their thoughts in such a way that readers get them. There seems to be a fallacy around that the choice is just between citing references, either to literature or data, and 'putting more of myself into the text' which often results in empty anecdote. This is why so many PhD examiners say 'if only you had explained this is the thesis' and then proceed to ask for changes that might not actually be what the candidate wanted to say - too late.

Every single paragraph in the new connections that we are now having to write comprises our personal authorial voices that speak out to the author about what we think and what we have to say - but always in close reference to evidence.

These are however difficult connections to make because they are between ideas that might not immediately look as though they connect. This therefore requires difficult writing. But the outcome, of new ideas, is well worth the effort.

## [70] A methodology for getting to the final text: small culture formation on the go

How it is possible to write 6/19

Finalising the text in your book or your thesis in a global manner, making sure everything is clear and fits together, is a very important task.

My co-author and I have just spent three days working on the final draft of our book. Our aim was to make every part of it speak with a clear message.

We had already written enough words for the book; but now our task was to bring out the main message. I don't think it was clear to either of us exactly

how we were going to do this. We had already worked intensively on a conclusion. I had presented about the book at Southampton University three weeks before, and written an abstract for the next IALIC conference. My co-author had also given presentations. All of this had helped.

So this is what we did.

We began with the conclusion and searched the whole book for the main points we had made there. This was to make sure that we really had talked about the things we thought we had, that the terms we were using were consistent, that the discussion flowed, that things were explained in the most appropriate places, and so on.

This process threw up a range of terms, concepts and bits of information that were not consistent and needed to be brought into synchrony. An example of this was that in some places we used 'focus group' and in some 'workshop' to refer to the same thing. We spent some time reviewing with each other which term we should use and then made sure that all through the text this was consistent. This wasn't just a choice between two terms, but became a very fruitful discussion about methodological approach and what this meant about understanding the people we were writing about.

As we looked around the text to check these things, other issues emerged that we also had to check through the book and put right.

When we thought that we were almost done, we met with a colleague who asked us what the book was about. We decided to read aloud to him the first sentences of the first chapter and discovered that they weren't clear at all! The result was that we went back not just to the beginning of the first chapter but also to the preface to do more re-writing - which again meant looking through the whole text for consistency.

Another important issue is that some of our thinking has actually changed during the process of researching and writing the book. In particular, our view of small culture formation on the go has changed. It is now quite definitely a site within which things happen - a place where the intercultural can be observed - rather than something which is produced. Therefore, every single place where it was mentioned needed to be looked at carefully to make sure that the message was consistent.

The publisher has also requested that we lose about 500 words. This required a careful edit all the way through - simplifying sentences and pruning dense thickets of verbiage. There were obvious places to look for where things could be cut or shortened - footnotes, long quotations, and references which were gratuitous, too long or redundant because of what had been said elsewhere. It's worth remembering that deleting a reference in the text also deletes an item in the bibliography and saves quite a few words. In one case there

were three references to the same person; and we decided that the most recent one covered the other two, which could therefore be removed.

We found in the first chapter two whole paragraphs that could be deleted because what they talked about had been dealt with in other chapters.

We are still not finished. It is good to have a little time to continue to look around and to edit through. It's good that we asked for a short extension six months ago to ensure that we would have this time.

A book is a huge opportunity and privilege - a large space within which to put lots of things that will be read for some time to come. It is therefore so important not to waste this opportunity and to get things as right as possible.

## [71] Getting the data chapters written

How it is possible to write 7/19

Getting writing done seems often to be a major problem for postgraduate researchers. A common scenario is that half way through the programme excellent progress has been made - large parts of literature review and methodology chapters written, most of the data collected and analysed, and perhaps a third of the thesis already in draft. It is then that researchers can get stuck, with not much more written even a year later.

The block seems to be writing the data chapters. This is serious because the data chapters constitute about a third of the thesis. They are the core around which the whole thesis revolves.

In some respects this should be the easiest part to write. In a classic qualitative study, the chapter titles and sections are already provided by the themes that have emerged from analysis. Half the number of words are the data extracts used to demonstrate the themes. The other half is the researcher talking about the extracts to explain how they do this. If the extracts are bigger, what you say about them is also bigger.

There is a particular writing style that needs to be acquired to do this well. But, once you have acquired it, you should be able to move quickly.

However, some researchers find this daunting and do all sorts of things to postpone writing about the data. I've seen so many theses where data chapters begin with several or more pages of literature before actually getting to the data. As an examiner, I've been reading through the literature and methodology chapters and am actually looking forward to seeing the actual data. What a disappointment when I have to browse through page after page before getting to it!! (Corrections then often require all of this stuff to be moved to the parts of the thesis where it best belongs.)



There is certainly a place for literature in data chapters - but only towards the ends of sections in response to, rather than leading, what has been said about the data.

One of the problems may be a false believe that you cannot write about your data until you have read more and more literature. You have become good at reading; and this can become an easy means of procrastination. Another means of procrastination seems to be endlessly perfecting the methodology chapter. It's a bit like spending ages preparing to do something but never actually doing it. Running around in front of the data chapters, but not having the courage to go in. This might be why, in my opinion, many methodology chapters seem over-written.

There may also be a misunderstanding of what supervisors mean when they say that the data has to speak to the literature and theory. This is of course true; but it doesn't mean that you can't write about the data until all the literature and theory has been sorted out.

So, recently, I have been asking my students to write a good draft of all their data chapters before reading more and more. Where they are full-time PhD students, I am insisting that they do this by the end of their second year!

So far, the results of this advice have been excellent. They have been producing excellent pieces of writing - far from finished, but rich texts into which they can later put in how they relate to literature and theory. They have been taking notes as they go about how literature and theory might relate, but not stopping to read more and more. They have kept going and - so far - are getting the data chapters written.

## [72] How to write about data

How it is possible to write 7/19

Following my last blog, how should we write about data? There's a chapter on this in my qualitative research book<sup>11</sup>, plus another chapter on writer voice. Here though are some thoughts about basic principles. I'm writing about qualitative data; but I have also heard examiners make it clear that they expect something similar in vivas in music experimental sport science, English literature, history, religious studies and so on. It's basically to do with going into detail about what you think is going on in the data whatever it is.

The problem is, however, that many researchers don't seem to appreciate this. I've seen so many data chapters that simply present extracts of data with

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<sup>11</sup> Doing and writing qualitative research, 3rd edition, Sage, 2016

very brief summaries of what they contain without interrogating any of the detail of what they might mean. This is a hugely missed opportunity because it is in the detail and the uncertainty of what it might mean that the new knowledge resides, and this is why companies produce software solutions for automated data combing and preparation, meaning you're able to view the data in simple terms and find this new knowledge that the data can produce.

When beginning a data chapter, it is really, really important to get into the data as quickly as possible. At this point in the thesis, we should already know, from the methodology chapter, that the theme of the chapter emerges from the analysis of the data, and how it emerges. It is therefore not necessary to explain this in detail all over again. Half a page describing the theme and the sub-themes that make up each section is probably enough, then going straight into the first section. I would say that the first extract of data could even appear at the end of the first page.

A useful parallel to writing about each data extract is giving a PowerPoint presentation. On the screen you have the extract. The presenter then stands between it and the audience, points at the relevant bits of the extract and explains to the audience what she thinks might be going on.

I have often been surprised when researchers speak really interestingly about their data in a seminar presentation, but, then, somehow forget all of this when they write. It is therefore good to record the presentation and use the transcript as a basis for writing.

I am not of course talking about presentations that simply summarise and describe, which are not at all satisfactory. Also, the audience should definitely not be left by themselves to make sense of and interpret the data. Researchers need to show the audience the *detail* of what it is that they are noticing in the data that enables them to arrive at their interpretation.

The authorial voice of the researcher therefore stands between the data extract and the audience and explains to the audience what might be going on in the data by 'pointing' to the key parts of it that support this interpretation. It is also good to show that meaning does not emerge too easily and to display reflexivity.

The extracts therefore need to be sufficiently long and rich to show the full complexity that supports the *necessary ambivalences* of the interpretation. The longer the extract, the more needs to be written about it. Also, it must not be forgotten that the data extracts may not only be what participants have said or written. They can be from research diaries, photographs, drawings, plus bits of quantitative data, all of which contain complex textual material. Even what you yourself have noted at the time of collecting the data is itself data - hence the possibility of auto-ethnography and creative non-fiction.

What is particular about qualitative data is that it needs to be interconnected in a thick description - showing how what you think might be going on is helped by what you've seen in other parts and types of the data you've collected. Therefore, running on from the classic thematic analysis, where themes are found across all of the types of data in a holistic manner, the data chapters should also be organised to allow the different types of data to speak with each other within each theme. Of course, when I say 'speak', it is the researcher who does the speaking by explaining to the audience where the connections lie.

Finally, writing the data chapters is itself a continuation of the analysis of the data. Writing is itself a form of analysis. As you write, you will continue to move things around, even to change the names of themes, revisit what is going on in the data and even see things that you hadn't seen before. Keeping going to get it all laid down in text is good. Getting this done quickly will allow time to go back and look again. If there are black holes that you really cannot get around, jump to the next theme. What comes later might enable you to navigate them better from another perspective. You can even say in your thesis that there are black holes than cannot be navigated. This could be part of the new knowledge.

## [73] Explaining things

How it is possible to write 7/19

This blog is partly from the common memory of what happens so often in doctoral vivas, when examiners say 'why didn't you explain that in your thesis?' But it also comes from lots of situations when people just don't tell you what you need to know.

I was talking to an examiner recently about a student I know who they'd recently examined:

Me: What I found quite interesting about the thesis was ...

Examiner: Oh, she didn't mention that. Yes, that *would* have been interesting. What a shame it didn't come out in the viva.

Me: Didn't you see it in the thesis?

Examiner: No. I must have missed it. There was so much unexplained detail that it was quite easy to miss things.

Me: What a missed opportunity!

I used to think that this was a cultural thing, of course, in the most non-essentialist way - if that's possible. But perhaps it's more to do with people being used to communicating with other people in relatively familiar social

settings. The above conversation certainly had nothing at all to do with where the student 'came from'.

This is why I often use the example of having guests visiting you in a place that you are familiar with but they are not. You are showing them around the town where you live. But it might be hard to break out of what is in your head about what is going on and to imagine what might be in their heads. So this example probably doesn't work.

A long time ago, an Iranian friend of mine went on a car journey into the Iranian countryside with some British people. Afterwards, she told me that she was amazed at what they chose to talk about - what they noticed along the way and what they had to say about it. This was a countryside that she was familiar with; but she thought that they said such strange things about it.

At the time, she explained this as having something to do with British people thinking in a different way to Iranian people. Of course, now, this explanation seems to be ridiculously over-generalised. Indeed, it comes dangerously close to neo-racism! There was certainly an 'us'-'them' implication lurking in what she said about it.

Nevertheless, there will always be discourses, narratives, and the traditions and histories associated with them, that will make any social group talk about things, and appear to notice things, in different ways to other social groups. At a national level, grand narratives, common histories, media preoccupations, and all sorts of 'us'-'them' perceptions of the world that come from how we are brought up, will always bring about differences in what people notice and talk about. This certainly applies to different generations - with different experiences of say social media.

This does not however imply different *types* of thinking - different degrees of criticality for example. What is common across all cases is the underlying universal cultural processes that enable small culture formation on the go. It is the *content* that will differ. We are, after all, the same people brought up in different circumstances.

So, what the Iranian encountered in the 'British' car journey was not some sort of alien thought process - it was people coming at what they were experiencing with different narratives - different personal cultural trajectories.

What therefore we need to do when we write our thesis, is to try really hard to anticipate what our readers need to know.

This is where the notion of third space becomes useful. Not the old essentialist notion of third space as in-between essentialist culture blocks - but a space that we can somehow construct which might be somehow independent of the narratives and histories that preoccupy us differently. Finding threads

that enable us to really communicate with others is by no means an easy matter. It really has to be worked at.

## [74] 'Your English is so good'

Issues with culture 11/19

What would be the conditions for it to be OK to congratulate someone on their English on first encounter? I don't somehow think it's enough that they might be just someone one meets in a country where English isn't ... and as soon as I begin to write this sentence I feel stalled because I don't know how to finish it. Does it mean that all compliments should only be made to people one knows well enough to know that there are circumstances in their life which mean that it would be well-received? For example, I can compliment one of my students on their writing because I know that they've been working hard to perfect it - or on their English because I know they've been studying hard in a language school to get to this level.

Does this mean that in all interactions we need to research carefully the people we are interacting with to make sure that we aren't jumping to knee-jerk, easy, essentialist assumptions based on uncriticised grand narratives and stereotypes? This is surely how we deal with grand narratives - with taken-for-granted stories about who we are in the world.

## [75] Café Náderi

Issues with culture 1/20

A while ago I was leading a seminar on intercultural issues with a group of masters students in migration studies. They were particularly diverse with backgrounds from across the world.

I showed them a photograph that I had taken myself of a café in downtown old Tehran, Iran. In the photograph are young women and men, possibly university students, talking, looking at books and papers and, I think quite clearly, enjoying being together and engaged in discussion.

I was surprised when one of the students put up her hand and said that this was Café Náderi. I didn't think anyone would recognise it. I had said that we could discuss as the seminar proceeded; so I was happy to stop and talk about the café's iconic nature. It has been there since 1927 and has had a constant reputation for being a meeting a place for generations of artists, writers, students and people who just want to enjoy the atmosphere. I only went there

once; but felt that I knew it immediately based on what people had said about it.

I noted how proud the student who put up her hand seemed to be - as though so pleased that other students in the class could see this positive image of where she came from - an image of immense cultural and intellectual sophistication that would resonate with everyone in the room. It was a café like many others across the world, but a special one - and an image that was so well-known that a British professor was using it in his material.

The student's apparent excitement indeed matched my reason for showing the photograph. It was part of my point that self-directed critical discussion is not only found in the 'Western culture' that claims to monopolise it. The photograph was juxtaposed with another one of a seminar at Tehran University in which the lecturer and students are sitting around in the sort of animated discussion that many people think can only happen 'in Western universities'. (I remember myself being surprised, pleasantly, at the very high level of extremely well-informed discussion when I did a question-answer session with students at Tehran University twenty years ago.) The fact that all women in the café are wearing hijab might also lead people to imagine, falsely, that there might be traditional restrictions against such 90-year-old 'modern' café life.

Another photograph that I used was of young Iranian women celebrating, with huge colour, diversity and self-expression, being allowed, after decades of protest, to attend football matches. That many of them are holding, wearing, painting on their faces Iranian flags indicates that they can be both intensely critical and proud of their country.

However, the student's intervention made me think of something more. I have often said that what we bring with us is our greatest resource in making sense of the cultural Other - once we can see past the destructive 'us'-'them' grand narratives with which we have been brought up. But also important are the images of ourselves at our cultural best that we can bring as threads to connect with others. These are not restrictive, blocking statements about how 'in our culture' we don't, cannot, never ... - but memories from our personal cultural trajectories - our histories - that remind everyone that 'we can'.

I think that the student who put up her hand felt under some sort of attack. Her country was suffering from bad press. She needed something positive to be associated with.

## [76] Putting theory in its place

How it is possible to write 6/20

Especially when we are starting out as researchers, we are confronted with a number of theories about the world and about research. Often these are produced by well-known people. They can be intimidating, difficult to understand, and seemingly way above us.

However, the people who make them are in many ways just like us. They are trying to make sense of the world.

They have become famous and influential through hard work, brilliant thinking, good writing, good networking, being read and disseminated by the right people, and sometimes by being in the right place at the right time.

Some of us can be like them if we have the ability, the desire or the opportunity, and with the right circumstances.

However, there is nothing sacred about these theories. They are fluid collections of ideas which are by their nature interpretable and negotiable. If they appear bounded, fixed and untouchable it is because of the institutional, academic and sometimes wider politics that make use of them - packaging and monopolising them to build careers, establish status and define disciplines. This does not reduce the value of the theories themselves, but might make them look more fixed than they need to be. The desire to reify theory in the service of disciplinary division of labour can also lead to the artificial segmentation into tightly defined methods in the service of the neoliberal university.

We all therefore need to be reassured that it is not the theories themselves but academic politics that require us to follow them as though they are fixed in their nature and boundaries. Some researchers have no choice but to submit to this politics because of the circumstances in which they find themselves; but they should be aware that it is the politics that requires this and not the theory.

However, in my experience, we sometimes think that there is a politics when there isn't. We think that we need to follow theories as though they are fixed when in fact they are not. We don't believe that we will actually get higher grades and more approval if we are able to interpret, adapt and even develop theories to suit our needs.

But we *can* interpret, adapt and even develop theories to suit our needs. We don't need to be famous to have our own theories; and our own theories don't have to be famous. They need to be useful to us - to help us to make sense of the world. We are all free to take from, add to, and make use of other people's theories - as long as we give full acknowledgement where appropriate. We are all free to theorise.

## [77] Getting the beginning right: saying complicated things in simple terms

How it is possible to write 6/20

I'm now getting back into writing my new book. I have been stuck for some time. I appreciate how this happens to doctoral students. I have written some substantial parts but feel that I can't go any further until I revisit what the whole book is about. I have a proposal; but it isn't enough. I am now therefore going back to the beginning to get the early statements on the first few pages right. This will set up the rest of the book and help me to know how to frame what comes in all the other chapters. I can now do this with knowledge of some of the things that come later.

Immediately though, I begin to learn more about why people find literature review so difficult - and why, in a recent thesis I examined it was impossible to work out what the whole thing was about when the person who wrote it thought it was fine. The result wasn't good!

The problem is that there's so much stuff!! So much clutter!! For me, I've got this cumbersome 'grammar of culture' that I've developed - a complicated theoretical framework that's very hard to describe in a small space. The book is supposed to be applying it; so it has to be there. I could try and simplify it; but then I'd be committing the sin of creating a simplistic explanation that will promote easy answers for ever more. This does not though mean not in simple terms.

So what I'm trying to do is to get the basics of the storyline down first. This means simple sentences that follow logically on from each other. I can put in brackets in the middle of sentences '[insert reference]'. This means that I don't let the references and the theoretical terminology drive the story, but the other way round. The simple sentences come first. Regarding my theory, I try and stand back from it and try and work out what I want to do with it. It's a tool that I want to use. I need to work out how I'm going to use it - what it's useful for - and try and write that down, again in very simple terms.

The book does already have an inherent storyline. Like many doctoral theses, this develops from personal experience of something that you need to get to the bottom of. Therefore, the whole reason why I need to get the basic concepts sorted out in simple terms right at the beginning is because it's the beginning of what I need to do to get to the bottom of things.

When I say 'simple terms', it doesn't mean that it should be simplistic. Indeed, the reason why there should be a whole book on this topic is that there is something too complicated to deal with in a shorter piece of writing. But



because the topic is complicated doesn't mean that the mode of writing has to be complicated.

The trick therefore is to write about complicated things in simple terms - and to say, in simple terms, that they are complicated. I guess sentences like:

This is not a straightforward matter. Trying to sort out what this means is what I shall be doing throughout the book

So, if I can't quite work out how I'm going to use the theory, I can actually come out and say that. So, with my grammar of culture, I need to say something like:

It is a conceptual device that shows [insert]. Here I therefore intend to use it to [insert]. Its purpose is to try to make sense of [insert]. But how exactly this will work out will become clear as the book develops.

Well - at least something like that.

And writing this blog certainly helps. At least I've got something out.

## [78] Small culture shock

Issues with culture 7/20

As I write about my time in Iran at the age of 23 for my new book, I have to accept that I underwent extreme culture shock. It had all the features that are commonly described in the literature except for one crucially important one.

It was about dealing with the very strange and going through various stages of making sense and adapting. But it was not about learning a new national or civilisational culture - i.e. 'Iranian culture'. I refuse to believe that 'Iranian culture' exists as a definable object that explains and predicts the behaviour of all the people who are somehow inside it. It's instead a powerful figurative idea.

Rather than this essentialist large culture explanation, I'm going to use a small culture frame.

Small culture shock is about what is going on around us. My first memory of small culture shock was going to school for the first time. What was significantly different about going to Iran were the Orientalist grand narratives of national or civilisational culture that I took with me. These were the things that initially got in the way of me seeing people just as people and enabled me to build theories about who they were when things got bad. I had picked these

narratives up throughout my childhood and early adulthood from stories, books, radio, television, education, between the lines of everyday language, so on. In the 1950s and 60s the imagery was far less rampant than it is now; but it was still very much there. So many children's books were full of images of a culturally deficient Other derived from stories of empire.

It is these grand narratives of national or civilisational culture - these blocks - that we have to get past, to put aside to be able to find the threads that bring us together. We will still be different to each other. There was nothing at all that could prevent me from being 'British' in Iran - but 'British' in some far more intangible way than the equally blocking grand narrative about 'the West' that was in the air of my presence there. There was undeniably a powerful global politics going on. The American influence in Iran was huge at that time, even down to the street markings. There were huge civilisational conflicts that eventually led to revolution.

In my small culture approach I am by no means denying cultural difference and conflict. But these are far more diverse, fractured, hybrid, porous, unexpected, shifting and undefinable than the grand narratives of national or civilisational culture lead us to believe. There was indeed a lot of learning to do - but at a small cultural level with manners, language, managing space, taking part, food, washing, sleeping, waking, generally being - but things we all have to work on in different cultural environments as we move through life everywhere - things we are already equipped to recognise and learn ideology the grand narratives don't get in the way. How to continue to be creatively and genuinely one's self in new environments - certainly not to pretend or imitate.

It certainly was not the case, and never has been, that we were divided by the silly dimensions of 'high-' or 'low-context', 'individualist' or 'collectivist'. These are simply neo-racist categories that are the products of Orientalism under the positivist and methodological nationalist guise of science. It is very easy to find people everywhere claiming them, even, or especially in objectivist research interviews, simply because they are available and easy narratives to speak. We are all all of these things in different ways at different times in particular circumstances.

So, the theory I will stay with for the moment is small culture formation on the go - the everyday process of making sense of the world around us - the constant, daily struggle to put aside the grand narratives of national or civilisational culture that plague us and lead us to awful prejudice.