

## Case Study

The following reconstructed ethnographic account is taken from Holliday (2019: 130-132). It is based on a number of interactions and observations. The characters and the event are fictional.

Nada had to write an essay about cultural identity for her coursework. It had to be based on an interview with someone from a different cultural background to her own. She chose to interview Jahan because he was the most foreign person in her group, at least from her point of view, and he always seemed pleasant and friendly. She thought it would be an opportunity to get to know him better.

In a session to help them prepare for the interviews, their tutor said that they should avoid using the word 'culture' altogether because he said this would make the questions too 'leading' and take everyone off on predictable paths. Nada really couldn't understand this. If they were supposed to be talking about culture, why couldn't they just name it? She really believed that people would simply talk about what they believed, and that it was false and even patronising to use 'special devices' to make them talk in particular ways.

What might the reason for not mentioning 'culture' be?

Should people just talk about what they believe?

What might 'special devices' be?

During the interview, she found Jahan warm and expressive. He had a lot to say, and she didn't have to work hard at all to keep it going. One or two of her other classmates had told her that they had found it really difficult to keep the interview from drying up.

He began by saying that he was pleased that they were meeting in a public place because it was actually against his culture to mix with women outside his family. He went on to describe how difficult it was for people who came from his country to work in pairs in the classroom with people from the opposite sex and be expected to talk about quite personal things sometimes. He explained that talking to her was different because she was a professional woman who had introduced herself to him formally about the interview.

What is the significance of being 'a professional woman' and 'a public place'?

Is there any connection here with intercultural skills?

Is 'keeping to going' the mark of a good interview?

Can we refer to what Jahan says as an essentialist or culturalist statement about culture?

Is Nada falling into a trap? If so, how and why?

Nada was very impressed with Jahan for being prepared to stick to his cultural values in this way. She felt he had principles and traditions which she was afraid were not being taken seriously in the international setting of their programme.

When she came to write the assignment, she found some recent research which confirmed what Jahan had told her about his culture. Moreover, some of this literature explained why his culture and others like it were not compatible with the culture in which their programme was taking place. She had also read about Othering and argued in her assignment that the aims and values of the programme they were on were Othering Jahan's culture by failing to recognise the cultural incompatibility and forcing people like him into inappropriate behaviour.

When Nada got a low grade for her assignment, with the comment that she was in effect Othering Jahan and his culture, and that she was not being sufficiently critical of the literature, she really couldn't understand where to turn. Her first reaction was to think that the person who marked it was being so insensitive about people like Jahan other cultures generally – that he just couldn't see beyond his own cultural values and actually proved the point that she was making in her assignment. She didn't however anticipate what happened next.

So who is Othering who?

On what basis could the marker disagree with the literature that she had read?

What does this have to do with conflicting models of culture and the intercultural?

She was talking about the issue with a group of people when her friend, Osama, got quite angry and said that Nada was being really ignorant in taking people like Jahan seriously. Osama said that if Nada had heard that sort of thing from someone in her own so-called 'culture' she would have rejected him immediately for being sexist.

Osama did come from the same region that Jahan did, but Nada wondered if she really knew his culture. Jahan went on to say that Nada was being very naïve and needed to know that, just like everywhere else in the world, there were lots of political issues. She said that the problem with people like Jahan was that they claimed that they represented their entire society, whereas in fact they represented a particular religious group.

Osama said that Nada's tutor was right in saying that they needed to be more critical of the literature, much of which was only interested in confirming stereotypes. On the other hand, it was Jahan who was Othering himself by claiming that his entire society is confined within a narrow stereotype. Osama was also angry because people like Nada just jumped at every opportunity to find some exotic cultural practice to protect. Moreover, he wasn't entirely convinced that her tutor's liberal attitude wasn't also part of some sort of cultural superiority, to say how people should or should not talk about other people's cultural backgrounds.

Osama is taking what has been referred to as a postcolonial position (Mignolo 2007; Quijano 2007)

Why would Jahan say something that is Othering or stereotyping himself?

This is sometimes referred to as 'strategic essentialism'.

Is he lying?

When we interview people, are we interested in what they say as facts about themselves, or why they choose to say what they say?

Do you believe Jahan or Osama? Why? Can you relate this to aspects of your own identity?

What is the problem with 'exotic'? Exoticising?

How might all of this relate to Orientalism (Edward Said 1978)? - where the West imagines the East as not able to think critically or independently

Might Osama be 'Westernised'? Why might be consider this label insulting?

Is 'intercultural awareness' to do with learning other people's cultures, or something else?

Who is in the biggest difficulty, Nada or the tutor?

I have defined the intercultural as 'whenever and wherever we encounter cultural practices and values that cause us to position and reposition ourselves. Importantly, this positioning and repositioning concerns all involved parties whether "arriving" or "already there", if it is indeed possible to distinguish' (Holliday 2022: 373)

## Bibliography

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