

Educational and Institutional contexts

Undoing pervasive culturalism and 'us'- 'them' prejudice

Example 1: Two friends talking about an intercultural training programme

Taken from Holliday (2019: 33-36)

Based on professional and personal experience with students, colleagues and friends

Francisca and Gita both had new jobs in the capital and tried to meet once a week for coffee to share experiences. They were both working for large organisations with international workforces where there were initiatives to learn how to work with cultural diversity.

Why not mention country?

Is there any irony?

Francisca was excited about some intercultural training sessions she had been to. She said that it had been really useful because they were given cultural profile information about different nationalities. Gita was immediately sceptical and said that she had heard about these profiles and advised Francisca not to be seduced by them. Francisca replied that she was aware of the dangers and that in fact their trainer had made a big point about how there were lots of exceptions, and that the profiles were to be considered as useful starting points. Gita said that she was really worried about this idea of 'useful starting points'. Francisca knew what was coming, because she felt that Gita was far too sensitive about issues of 'difference'. She wasn't surprised when Gita said that saying cultural profiles were useful starting points was like saying that race and gender stereotypes were useful starting points and that the very fact that the profiles were there at all encouraged discrimination. Gita went on to point out that saying there were exceptions just added to the seduction by implying that the profiles were inclusive even though they were not.

What is the issue here?

Why is Francesca so critical of, if not fed up with, Gita?

Why is Gita's position 'an uphill battle'?

Francisca thought a lot about Gita's attack. She thought that Gita was being unfair because there was absolutely no evidence of any sort of discrimination in the way in which the intercultural trainer talked about things. Indeed, the trainer emphasised all the time that the profiles were completely neutral and, far from discriminating against people from other cultures, allowed them a safe space where they could be themselves. For Francisca, this meant that her own values would be respected, and she wouldn't have to feel under pressure to be like people from other cultures. Also, there seemed to be so much careful research behind the profiles, which had been developed by serious academics over a long period of time. When Francisca tried to explain this, Gita got very angry indeed, and started going on about how patronising all of this was. Gita said that this business of 'safe space' had been the justification for Apartheid in South Africa, and for saying that women should 'stay at home' - to somehow 'give them' power to 'be themselves' in a domain which belonged to them, but which was in effect completely restricting.

Why doesn't Francesca get what Gita is complaining about?

Does Gita actually have a point?

Why is it unlikely that large organisations would get Gita's point?

Gita could see that Francisca wasn't taking her seriously. No one ever did. She was just trying to work things out in her own terms; and sometimes she had to make extreme statements to get heard. She thought about Francisca talking about protecting her values. This was so important. She didn't want to give Francisca the impression that values didn't count.

Summary of positions:

Francisca - Using cultural profiles (stereotypes) as helpful starting points to predict and explain behaviour, and to allow space for culture-specific values - derived from the positivist paradigm which maintains that solid, large, national or ethnic 'cultures' can be described objectively as though they really exist as separate solid objects that define, control and predict the behaviour and values of the people who are brought up within them.

Gita - Not using cultural profiles because they are similar to discriminatory race or gender profiles - derived from the *postmodern* paradigm which critiques the positivist, modernist idea of neat, organised social reality, and maintains that national or ethnic cultures are always politically and ideologically constructed

Then, Gita found something of a resolution when she discussed her dilemma with another friend, Hande.

Hande was doing a course in anthropology and said that the approach to investigating culture which she had learnt about was very different to what Francisca had been describing. Instead of trying to define who people were from the outset, they were taught to watch how people behaved and to listen to what they said, and to try and work things out from there. She said it wasn't really a matter of whether Francisca was right or wrong, but that what she said, how she expressed what she believed and what went on in her inter-cultural training sessions was all stuff to be observed, and that that was the culture.

What does she mean by 'that that was the culture'?

This made Gita think that her own anger was therefore also something to be observed, and that that was part of her culture. Well, what it did seem to mean was that the cultural profiling that Francisca had been talking about was also an observable part of the culture of the people who made them.

What does this observation tell us about academic disciplines and ideological positions?

Is it a matter of simple choice - one construction or another?

Why is it good to talk to someone else coming from a different experience?

The next time that Gita and Francisca had coffee, Gita decided to try out what Hande had been talking about. She asked Francisca to look around at the people in the café and try to work out what they were thinking and doing. But when she suggested forgetting about cultural profiles, Francisca said that it was impossible. They talked about this and agreed that it was actually quite hard to try and think about people without imagining how they fitted into ideas they already had about which culture they came from. So, two men and a woman in a headscarf, who were speaking a foreign language that neither Gita nor Francisca could recognise, were most likely, they thought, to be from the Middle East, and this invoked media images of women being mistreated. Gita

found herself thinking exactly the same thing about them as Francisca and was quite shocked about this. Well, she thought, Francisca looked quite Mediterranean, so she asked her how she would feel if other people in the café just presumed that she always took long siestas in the afternoon and was always late for meetings.

When Francisca was horrified at this they began to talk about where these 'theories', which were in fact very inaccurate stereotypes, came from – well, from the media, from childhood, from the people they hung out with. It certainly was the case that they were very hard to shake off. So they tried to put the Middle East thing out of their heads, and there was absolutely no evidence, from the body language of the two men and the woman, or from their tone of voice, that the woman was being treated as they might expect, even if they were Middle Eastern. Both Francisca and Gita agreed that they did in fact know, from people they knew, that it was a myth anyway that Middle Eastern women were oppressed. How shocking, that even though they knew it was a myth, it still came so strongly into their minds.

So is Francesca now getting what Gita is concerned about?

When Francisca went to another training session she was thinking again about the experience in the café. She found it so hard to believe that all the scientific research that stood behind the cultural profiles could just be discounted. Of course, the people who carried them out must be influenced by the same prejudices that she and Gita had when they were in the café, but surely they wouldn't have allowed that to get in the way because they were carrying out objective research. Also, everyone in the training session clearly thought that the profiles were useful, and if what the trainer said was true there might be less pressure in the company to behave like Americans and British people. She knew that Gita would say that they weren't objective at all.

How does all this relate to **blocks** and **threads**?

Example 2: Teaching on an intercultural awareness programme,

Online for Chinese masters students in Language & Intercultural Communication, 12 hours over two weeks

1. 12 students, each in their university accommodation rooms
2. Asked them what cultural diversity they had encountered travelling from their homes to the university
3. One said none because they were all Chinese
4. I said I didn't believe her
5. I asked if any of them had experienced culturally different behaviour when visiting a family nearby in their street or apartment building
6. Gradually, several raised their hands and began describing huge and sometimes problematic differences
7. At the end of the course, I set a task, to write a 1000-word description of a cultural conflict they had experienced, followed by a 1000-word theoretical analysis. There were some excellent descriptions in the first part. But in the second part a number of them cited literature on 'Western-vs-Chinese' cultural stereotypes that completely contradicted the first part. (In the second year I did this, most cited more critical literature.)

Suggestion for programme content

This is taken from Holliday (2018: 8-10)

1. **Recovering and exploring small culture experience** - for example going to school, visiting the family next door, starting a new job - the building blocks of intercultural competence
2. **Recognising and dealing with blocks** - recalling prejudices, preoccupations and imaginations that got in the way - own experience of being misunderstood and misrepresented - the nature of essentialism, the origins of 'us'-'them' grand and personal narratives
3. **Looking for threads** - recalling examples of when we had breakthroughs with people we imagined we had nothing in common with - working out the skills that enable us to do this, the intercultural knowledge that we bring with us - the nature of small culture formation on the go and its challenges.

Bibliography

Holliday, A. R. (2018). Designing a course in intercultural education. *Intercultural Communication Education*, 1(1), 4-11.

---. (2019). *Understanding intercultural communication: negotiating a grammar of culture* (2nd ed.). Routledge.