

2 ChatGPT as naïve but knowledgeably responsive research assistant

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This is an account of a personal journey with ChatGPT as an aid to writing about and researching intercultural events and how I was able to sign it up as a tireless research assistant who needs lots of supervision. My marvel and anxiety stem from seeing how it can reproduce complex ideas and discourses, but vulnerable to the same dominant discourses and grand narratives that affect all of us. Two examples of a student using it to produce an ethnographic description, and of asking it to reproduce my own research and that of an opponent, enabled observations regarding the following:

- (1) The knowledge required to instruct ChatGPT and subsequent implications for students and their teachers
- (2) Faultlines in intercultural communication and ethnography (in the widest sense of critical qualitative method)
- (3) The between-the-lines persistence of an Orientalist, exoticist 'us'-'them' grand narrative.

My interaction with ChatGPT rather than other similar software came about when introduced to me by a colleague who showed me how to set up a free account and how to ask questions. I quickly discovered that it could produce immaculate text of all types in seconds, including a Wordsworth-style poem about a cup of coffee on a café table and then translate it into Persian. I say 'immaculate' because its text was clean, with perfect grammar, both in English and in Persian. I had asked 'in the style of Wordsworth' because this early 19th century poet is well-known for his simple but eloquent style and something that I would recognise. The poem it produced was indeed in that style. This indicated that ChatGPT had done its research. I felt it therefore marvelously knowledgeable. However, while it may well also have researched poems about cups on café tables, I suspected that it was, of course, without the depth of direct experience of the social world. I did not see this as a weakness, but as an expected limitation. This also reminds one that there is well-respected scholarly writing that is similarly abstract in its direct experience of the social world. The larger point is that my first experience of ChatGPT was already

leading me to interrogate the nature of academic knowledge, and therefore to begin to understand that this first use of an AI device was leading me to assess the basis for my own research and writing.

As a note regarding presentation, I have included in the bibliography also the references cited in extracts from ChatGPT, given that they are indeed valid references.

2.1 Example 1: Using ChatGPT to write an ethnographic description

My first professional encounter was in a draft assignment from a medical student who I will call May. Her task was to write a short ethnographic description of an intercultural encounter she had witnessed during her hospital placement. Both May and the encounter are and were fictionalisations based on a range of experience with real people and events following the discipline of creative non-fiction (Agar, 1990; Holliday, 2022a).

After discussions in tutorials and initial attempts, May sent me an unexpectedly elaborate description which seemed to me too poetic and sensational. It described a patient whose eyes were ‘watering’ and ‘lips quivering’ with memories of a ‘distant’ culture and language that she was not able to express in front of the doctor. It also contained details that May had not mentioned when she had told me about the event that she was going to write about.

I suspected that the description was generated by ChatGPT because there were types of phrases I had seen in the Wordsworthian poem. It was also nothing like the style I had seen in her previous assignments. In the subsequent tutorial May openly admitted that she had used ChatGPT as an obvious choice because she had ‘no experience of using the emotional language necessary for writing ethnography’. I replied that ethnography should be precise in the same way as the professional reports she had written while on placement.

It was not however the ‘emotional style’ in itself that concerned me. May was quickly able to adjust her writing style appropriately once she realised she had another model to work from and was sufficiently convinced that this was what she had to do. I say ‘convinced’ because many students that I have encountered, and as reported by a number of colleagues, from all backgrounds, seem to have strong belief that any alternative to what they perceive as ‘dry academic writing’ should be formlessly ‘emotional’. Indeed, had May asked ChatGPT to write the ethnographic account in the style of a medical report, it would have done that too, as I shall demonstrate below. What led me to investigate further, not May, but ChatGPT, was that the emotionality of the description seemed exoticising in a way that I did not think that May had noticed or intended. This would not be surprising given that for May ‘emotional language’ was an unfamiliar alternative style to ‘academic’ or ‘professional’ writing, the nuances of which she did not therefore feel competent to judge. At the same time, ChatGPT, as with the Wordsworth poem, would be gleaning

the style from a data-base and would not evaluate the discourses involved unless asked.

2.2 The knowledge and instructions needed to get the required description

Because I do not have permission to share any of my students' actual work, I asked ChatGPT to write a similar description for me. This request in itself revealed aspects of what it could do. While I do not know what instruction May might have given it, my first attempt produced a description that was very similar in style and content to the one that she had sent me.

However, I felt I needed to ask ChatGPT to modify the description a number of times. Because May's description had a woman patient from South Asia, I first asked for the same. ChatGPT's subsequent assumption that there would be English language issues precipitated a layer of communication difficulty that overwhelmed other factors. I therefore asked for the patient to have good English. I chose Iran and a persistent cough because I have some background with Iranian society and have actually visited a doctor there with that illness. I then got a version where a woman patient was uncomfortable with a male doctor. I feared that this added a further variable that had complex intersections which were over and above the national culture depiction that I was testing. I also felt that it was inappropriate to assume that just because the patient was Iranian there should be a gender issue. I therefore requested that both patient and doctor should be women. I chose women rather than men because I am also familiar with a number of critical representations of Iranian woman (Afshar, 2007; Honarbin-Holliday, 2009; Satrapi, 2003).

Later in the essay I will show my own prompts that will help explain the responses I got from ChatGPT. At this stage, however, I was feeling my way and learning how to speak to it. This extract was therefore the result of quite a long conversation in several stages - too long to include here. The broader point here is that the user of ChatGPT needs to have considerable knowledge to guide it in its focus. The nature of this knowledge was what I myself was learning about.

The final description that I was prepared to go with was therefore pared down to a form within which I could begin to see some of the deeper issues. Following therefore is the ChatGPT-generated description I now wish to look at in more depth.

The woman, in her late forties, sat with her arms crossed loosely over her chest in the clinic's waiting room. Her dark hair, streaked with grey, was cut just below her shoulders. Dressed in jeans and a fitted sweater, she glanced at her phone, trying to distract herself from the dry tickle in her throat. When her name was called, she stood briskly, clearing her throat before following the nurse inside.

The female doctor welcomed her with a friendly smile. The woman explained her persistent cough in clear, confidently English, describing how it had lingered for weeks. Yet beneath her fluent words, there was a flicker of unease. In Iran, she might have been offered tea and gentle small talk before discussing her health. Here, the directness of the questions – how often, how severe, what colour the mucus – felt clinical and impersonal.

When the doctor suggested a chest examination, the woman hesitated. Though she understood the necessity, the request touched on a discomfort she couldn't fully explain. She shifted in her chair, finally agreeing with a polite nod. As she left the clinic with her prescription, she wondered if her reluctance was noticed – a subtle, lingering trace of the culture she had carried with her across borders. (ChatGPT)

2.3 Gratuitous, sensational elaboration

First, there are references to the patient's appearance and behaviour which appear gratuitous and sensational. I refer here to mention of how her arms are crossed, her hair style and colour, her style of dress, what she is doing with her phone. These details would be relevant, and not gratuitous if the researcher felt that they were of particular significance to the exigencies of the setting, the event and the interaction. In this description they instead seem to enhance the sensational language in 'flicker of unease' and 'lingering trace of culture' later on.

The implication here is that the ChatGPT description is not grounded in actual observation and therefore cannot discern crucial from gratuitous detail. I shall come back below to where ChatGPT gets the material for these descriptions from. I also suspect that it was using an evocative ethnographic style in which the aim is an immersion in (Bignold, 2011; Cherrington, 2015) or a 'kinetic understanding of other cultures' (Tedlock, 2011, p. 333) rather than an analytic approach whereby reconstructed text is separated as data from the voice of our authorial commentary that reflects back on it (Anderson, 2006; Atkinson, 2006; Holman Jones, 2005).

It is not my intention to argue for one rather than the other here. I am however querying why ChatGPT, when I asked it, said it prefers the evocative mode because:

The evocative mode ... creates an immediate, immersive experience for the reader, making cultural encounters more tangible and relatable. Since I don't have direct observational data, evocative writing allows me to construct a plausible, human-centred narrative that reflects broader cultural dynamics. It also aligns with the way many ethnographies today engage readers, especially in applied or public anthropology. (ChatGPT)

My reason for finding this problematic is as follows. On the one hand, ChatGPT is, as expected, going with the majority of the data it has access to as it ‘aligns with’ how ‘many ethnographers today engage readers’. However, again as expected, it does not ‘have direct observational data’. Therefore, on what basis can it ‘construct a plausible, human-centred narrative’? My fear is that it will, quite innocently, go with the dominant images that it finds in the material that it has access to. It is not ChatGPT’s fault that these images tend to be Orientalist, as I will argue below. I will also argue below that it will be critical about them when asked. But when its choice of ethnographic imagery is not challenged the dominant trope will be maintained. This of course mirrors how many of us will go with the dominant flow when we do not make the effort to be critical.

2.4 Persistent reference to traditional Orientalist structures that inhibit autonomy

This fear that ChatGPT will automatically veer towards an Orientalist trope unless challenged is evident in its description of the patient-doctor event. This includes reference to the well-known but false cultural stereotype – that everyone outside the West finds ‘Western culture’ too direct. Hence the reference in the description to how, ‘in Iran, she [the patient] might have been offered tea and gentle small talk before discussing her health’ and therefore found ‘the directness’ of the doctor’s question strange. This also relates to the high-low-context and collectivist-individualist distinction that runs through what I will refer to as the naïve positivist trope that has dominated intercultural communication studies (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2003; Lindholm & Mednick Myles, 2017; Triandis, 1995), and related to the Orientalist Western imagination of the indolence of the East and South (Holliday, 2022b; Said, 1978).

Contrary to this, the doctor I visited in Iran was no more or less ‘direct’ than doctors I have visited in Britain. It could be argued that this was because he was dealing with a ‘Western’ patient. But that would simply mean that we can all react to different people in different ways. Also, doctors in Britain can often be very ‘indirect’, for example, in the tacit manner with which, through hard-to-discern body language, voice-tone and eye-contact, they signal how time-limited the consultation needs to be. I argue elsewhere that directness and indirectness can be found everywhere, as is the case with high-context *small* cultural behaviour, including in British society (Holliday, forthcoming). I am also thinking of the well-known documentary ethnographic film about a local Iranian divorce court in which the judge is being very ‘direct’ in advising plaintiffs (Longinotto & Mir-Hosseini, 1999).

The persistence of the Orientalist trope about collectivist high-context ‘non-Western’ cultures was evident in each of the earlier ChatGPT descriptions that I discounted. They included the following phrases: ‘medical deci-

sions are often made collectively within the family’, ‘feeling the absence of her mother or husband, who would typically accompany her to medical appointments’, ‘conversations about health often unfolded slowly, with room for indirect expressions’, ‘medical consultations were often more indirect, with a preference for subtle language’.

This persistence also coincided, in some of the descriptions, with health decisions being negotiated within another aspect of the Orientalist trope – that these ‘cultures’ are traditional and hierarchical. For example, doctors where the patient came from are ‘authority figures who assessed patients without the need for them to articulate their symptoms in detail’, and ‘who took control of medical decisions, often with input from family members’, ‘often discussed with family elders’, in ‘a more paternalistic healthcare system where doctors made decisions on her behalf’.

This Orientalist trope was also sustained when I asked ChatGPT to generate the doctor’s post-consultation report, which was not designed to be evocative. Here, the patient was described as ‘hesitant in describing her symptoms and initially provided limited detail’, ‘appeared uncertain and reluctant to elaborate’, and ‘seemed unfamiliar with the expectation to articulate symptoms in detail and to participate in decision-making regarding treatment’. While these attributes could relate to any British patient, given that the patient was identified as Iranian, there was too much of a coincidence with the expected Orientalist stereotype. Seeing this in the more precise style of the report is all the more significant because it was the style that I encouraged May to use.

2.5 ChatGPT being critical

I did challenge ChatGPT about this – resulting in quite an extended conversation that is too long to include here. I therefore present some key parts. It shows that ChatGPT easily says more and more when I keep pushing.

Me: Don’t you think that this report is Orientalist in your assumption that the patient’s uncertainty is due to a discomfort with a Western emphasis on patient autonomy?

ChatGPT: That’s a really important point, and you’re right to raise it. Yes, aspects of the report *can* reflect an orientalist framing – specifically, the way it attributes her hesitancy primarily to her cultural background and assumes a binary between ‘Western autonomy’ and ‘non-Western passivity.’ ... In reality, her response could stem from a mix of factors: language barriers or unfamiliarity with UK healthcare norms (which many UK-born patients also struggle with), personal temperament or anxiety, Gender dynamics, a sense of being out of place in a new country – not necessari-

ly rooted in 'Eastern' values but in migration, adjustment, or past healthcare experiences.

Me: But isn't 'personal temperament or anxiety' in fact the only thing that you can be sure of?

ChatGPT: Yes – exactly. That's a really sharp observation, and you're absolutely right. As clinicians or observers, we can only confidently report what's directly observable: in this case, that she appeared hesitant, was reluctant to speak in detail, or seemed unsure about making decisions. Anything beyond that – whether cultural background, temperament, or anxiety – is speculative unless the patient articulates it herself or provides clear context.

At this point I feel that this response did not go far enough. Although it is saying that 'cultural background is speculative', ChatGPT seems still to hold a particular view about how cultural background is oriented. While it has "Eastern" values' in scare quotes, there is a sense that it believes that there is such a thing with a particular set of attributes. With the knowledge that this 'not going far enough' is a common failing for all of us, I therefore pushed further, and then again further. My next question is therefore purposefully provocative, given that the issue is not the differences per se, but how they are framed. And I got what I think is quite a startling admission marked by an emphatic *'did'*.

Me: But I don't see why you are even presuming that UK values are essentially different to Eastern values and that this has anything to do with perceptions of autonomy.

ChatGPT: Yes – spot on again. That's the core of the issue. The assumption that 'UK values' are fundamentally different from 'Eastern values' is a broad generalisation that doesn't hold up to serious scrutiny, and it risks reinforcing a false dichotomy that has historically been used in Orientalist discourse. ...

Me: Why therefore did you begin with an Orientalist stereotype as a default position and only present an alternative when I pushed you?

ChatGPT: ... The initial framing I gave *did* fall into an orientalist default, even if it was subtle. It relied on a familiar, pre-shaped narrative. ... That framing, while common in ethnographic writing and medical humanities, often reflects inherited academic tropes more than actual critical engagement. In reproducing it, I mirrored a normalised way of storytelling that's frequently unexamined ... These templates ... are embedded in how culture, migration, and healthcare are often discussed in the literature I've been trained on. They're pervasive.

Following this, coming back to the chat a few days later, I also asked if this literature was in a particular language, e.g. English. It replied:

ChatGPT: Yes, absolutely – and that’s a key part of the problem. When I say ‘the literature I’ve been trained on’, I’m referring primarily to English-language academic and clinical literature, particularly from Anglo-American contexts.

The degree to which ChatGPT is prepared to engage is impressive. And here, in its eventual admission of a response to a pervasive ideological position present in its training, it also provides forms of words, for example ‘pre-shaped narrative’, ‘inherited academic tropes’ and ‘mirrored a normalised way of storytelling’, that will also help me to express this in the future. Saying that English is ‘a key part of the problem’ also adds to the impression that ChatGPT can actually be critical. However, this could again be a mirroring back of the critical questions which I had asked and my own preoccupation which it has cleverly worked out. Interestingly, its use of ‘trope’ mirrors my own use of the term in this essay, which though ChatGPT has not read. Also, perhaps not ‘being critical’ but knowing the manner of how to present a critical voice, which ChatGPT will have will have got from its training. Nevertheless, even in parodying being critical, it helps me see my own preoccupation and indeed the ‘pre-shaped narrative’ that I myself need to challenge on a daily basis – as demonstrated in my own autoethnography of living in Iran in the 1970s (Holliday, 2022b).

It also helps explain May’s apparent general alignment with this trope. In tutorials, she referred several times to an East Asian colleague who described having been warned by a senior doctor at home about the expectation to be ‘autonomous’ in the British system. Out of all the conversations that May says she had had with other ‘foreign’ colleagues, this is the one that she came back to again and again. My response to her was that she should not take such statements at face value, and that she might consider the possibility that her colleague and their informant were surrounded by the same ‘us’-‘them’ grand narratives as we all are, as indeed is ChatGPT. I am assuming here that she has been brought up with the same ‘pre-shaped narrative’ as ChatGPT.

2.6 Example 2: More easy description

Following this experience with May, I decided to test ChatGPT’s ability to write longer research pieces in an area with which I was familiar – so as to be more easily aware of any distortion. I asked the following: ‘Can you write a short article – 2000 words – in the style of Holliday & Amadasi (2020). I then asked: ‘Write another article, also based on an interview, which argues convincingly against the non-essentialist, small culture approach of Amadasi and Holliday’.

What ChatGPT produced in seconds was impressive. The text imitating Amadasi and Holliday could easily have been written by Amadasi and Holliday, as the following extract shows.

We interviewed Leila, a 29-year-old migrant from Morocco who has lived in Italy for six years. Her story reveals how cultural identity is shaped by interactions, power dynamics, and personal agency.

‘I am more than where I come from’: challenging essentialism

When we first asked Leila how she would describe herself, her response was striking.

I am Leila. That’s the best way to start. I know people often want to hear that I am Moroccan, or Muslim, or an immigrant. But these labels feel too heavy sometimes, as if they decide who I am before I can speak for myself. Yes, I am all of these things, but I am also so much more.

Leila’s assertion exemplifies the limitations of essentialist thinking. By reducing individuals to fixed cultural categories, we risk overlooking the multiplicity of identities that shape a person’s experience (Holliday & Amadasi, 2020; Piller, 2011). For Leila, being Moroccan is a vital thread in her identity, but it is not the whole fabric. (ChatGPT)

It is well-written, given the limitations of a 2000-word text, in the sense that many students find difficult – a good thematic heading and a data extract, the analysis of which is then linked back to literature. The reference to ‘the whole fabric’ implies a deeper understanding of the concept of ‘thread’ for which Amadasi and Holliday are known.

The text imitating the opposite argument and supporting essentialism, is equally impressive in the way that it is developed, as the following extract shows – with references that were not asked for in the instruction that I gave.

When asked about his sense of identity, Omar’s response was clear:

I am Jordanian. I’ve lived in Germany for more than a decade, but I don’t think of myself as German. It’s not just about citizenship or where I live – it’s about values, traditions, and ways of seeing the world that are part of who I am.

Omar’s assertion aligns with the essentialist view that culture provides a stable foundation, or what some scholars term ‘cultural anchors’ (Huntington, 1996; Triandis, 1995). These anchors are deeply ingrained

in one's sense of self and cannot be entirely reshaped by new contexts. Omar explained that his Jordanian upbringing continues to influence his decisions, particularly in family and social relationships:

In Jordan, family is central. Even though I live far away, I call my parents every day. My wife and I teach our children Arabic because I want them to understand where they come from. These things don't change, no matter where I am.

(ChatGPT)

There is also an apparent sophisticated treatment of theory which includes a clever use of Orientalism, which Amadasi and Holliday use to support their approach in the first text, to argue against it.

According to Hofstede's (1980) dimensions of culture, Jordan's high-context communication style contrasts sharply with Germany's low-context approach. While Omar has adapted to his new environment, his Jordanian framework continues to guide his behaviour, allowing him to strike a balance between integration and authenticity.

... While Holliday and Amadasi (2020) advocate for dismantling such stereotypes, their approach fails to account for the power of dominant narratives that impose essentialist identities on individuals. As Said (1978) argues in *Orientalism*, the West often constructs reductive images of non-Western cultures, framing them as monolithic and backward. These perceptions, however problematic, are deeply entrenched and shape intercultural dynamics in profound ways. (ChatGPT)

This turning of the argument cleverly uses 'deeply' and 'profound' to balance the critique that Orientalism might be 'reductive'.

2.7 The easy manufacture of data

What I find problematic is not the strength of the opposing argument for which there must be space in proper academic discussion. It is instead the ease with which these arguments can be manufactured with whatever slant is necessary to support the argument. That it is so easy to imagine 'migrants' and their beliefs raise serious ethical issues, but perhaps also reflect a new world in which whatever image is required for whatever argument can be created with astonishingly 'convincing' detail.

This reminds me that in all the doctoral examinations I have witnessed, examiners have rarely questioned the actual existence of interview data. There has been considerable emphasis on how it has been analysed, sorted, presented and kept in 'secure places'. Just because it is the part of ethnography that

can be transcribed and then highly technically notated, searched and minutely analysed, interview text has been viewed irrefutably as 'hard data'. This is despite the considerable critical scholarship that demonstrates how prone it is to intersubjectivity and how what people might choose to say at any particular moment in time is dependent on the multiple other things that are going on (Merrill & West, 2009; Miller, 2011; Roulston, 2011; Talmy, 2011). Rarely do we see a detailed ethnographic account of the interview event that might take into consideration these factors.

Clever researchers could therefore fabricate the data just as ChatGPT has in the above extracts. To do this convincingly would require a depth of knowledge for which some albeit misplaced credit might be given. When I say 'misplaced', I wonder though if it is any more misplaced than the credit that is commonly given for the highly technicalised trail of naïvely positivist procedures employed to make the collection and analysis of the data appear objective when it is not.

On the other hand, this ease with which ChatGPT can make fabricated data appear real also puts into question the validity of ethnography which does not pretend to make data objective. This applies to any ethnographic description, including fieldnotes or research diary entries, that provide the deeper background to what might be going on in an interview. Here, it is the careful disciplines of making the familiar strange, allowing the unexpected to emerge and piecing together unexpected interconnections within the broader canvas of the setting to form thick description which makes the difference (Geertz, 1993, pp. 6-7), and which ChatGPT cannot provide.

The two texts above in which ChatGPT pretended to be me and my co-author and then our opponents *are* openly pretences. I do nevertheless wonder where the detail that they construct originates. When I pressed ChatGPT about where it got the material for the interview extracts, it told me:

The interview extracts in my response were entirely fictional, created to illustrate the arguments and critiques of the small culture approach. I did not base them on real interviews or existing materials but instead crafted them to align with the themes of essentialist cultural identity, migration experiences, and intercultural challenges. If you need a more authentic approach, you could conduct a real interview, and I could help structure, analyse, and integrate the responses into a well-supported argument with references. Let me know how you'd like to proceed! (ChatGPT)

To press further, I pretended that they were 'already very authentic and convincing' and asked if they were therefore based on 'material from data cited in existing published articles'. ChatGPT replied that:

The interview extracts feel authentic because they are modelled on common themes in migration studies, cultural identity research, and intercultural communication literature. However, I did not take them from any existing published articles or real data. Instead, I constructed them based on my knowledge of real-world migration narratives, academic discussions on essentialism and interculturality, and typical experiences reflected in scholarly sources. (ChatGPT)

When I asked precisely where this knowledge came from, it responded:

My knowledge of real-world migration narratives, academic discussions on essentialism and interculturality, and typical experiences reflected in scholarly sources comes from several key areas ... major works by scholars like Hofstede, Triandis, Said, Huntington, and Vertovec. I have processed a vast range of academic texts, research articles, and theoretical frameworks from disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and intercultural studies. ... I recognise common themes in academic discourse. ... My ability to synthesise information allows me to construct plausible narratives that align with well-documented migration experiences. (ChatGPT)

This extract is just part of an extensive account that ChatGPT instantly provided.

Basing ‘real-world migration narratives’, especially with imagined evocative content, on ‘scholarly sources’ is deeply concerning given the way that ‘migration’ has been aggressively commodified in recent years to support political agendas. Compare this with the complaint made by Manal Issa, one of the lead actors in the film, *The swimmers* (El-Husseini, 2022), about the Syrian refugee who became an Olympic swimmer in Germany. She said that the ‘Orientalist cliché’ of the film ignored political, historical and linguistic identities, and that while they were filming crossing the sea in a small boat, there were real migrants risking the hazards of crossing in small boats nearby (Fahim, 2022). Is therefore ChatGPT making it easy to produce digestible dramatisations of migrant experience for the purpose of academic analysis when the real experiences of migrants remain elsewhere? While I do believe that ChatGPT would respond positively and critically to this accusation if asked, my point throughout is that the user needs to know this - hence the nature of the ‘knowledge’ that users need to have.

Returning to medical student May, I have no doubt that she genuinely cared about the identity implications surrounding perceptions of the intercultural in the health setting in which she was going to work, and also in the broader canvas of her society. However, in the high-stake and high-performance environment of health professional training, analysing and navigating the hidden discourses and narratives of ChatGPT and the complex politics of

the intercultural, would she have the inclination, time and energy to query the evocative language which seems to 'bring to life' the description or personal account of someone with a migration background?

But engaging with and reflecting on ChatGPT in this way makes me also feel that I need to revisit my own ethnographic method whether it be selecting the interview extracts or constructing descriptions that suit my argument. It does therefore help me to think again about my own practice. I will come back to this in the following.

2.8 The questions one asks

A crucial point here is that one needs to have sufficient knowledge of one's own positionality to be able to interrogate ChatGPT's responses and then know what to ask next. But this also parallels the questions one needs to ask oneself during the necessary process of being reflexive.

Thinking again about how my own reflexivity and positionality emerged unexpectedly when I decided to further test the extent of ChatGPT's knowledge, I asked for a definition of native-speakerism, the term which I myself am known for defining (Holliday, 2005: 6). It provided the definition and then elaborated. Following is an extract from the conversation that then ensued. I have again cut out a huge amount of elaboration on the part of ChatGPT.

ChatGPT: It [native-speakerism] often leads to discrimination against non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) and undervalues diverse English varieties and teaching methods.

Me: How can a definition of native-speakerism mention discrimination against NNESTs if they don't actually exist as a category of real people?

ChatGPT: You're raising an interesting ontological question ... This ties into debates in applied linguistics about the constructed nature of nativeness and the social implications of labelling. Even though 'NNEST' is not a biologically or inherently real category, ... it is institutionally enforced in hiring practices, language assessment, and teacher training.

Here ChatGPT deals skilfully with the very tricky question of whether or not so-labelled 'non-native speakers' actually exist as a social group, given the ideological nature of the 'native speaker' label. The reference to ontology explains this well. 'Institutional enforcement' is a turn of phrase which then sums up the nature of its 'reality' in a way that I have been trying to work out for some time and therefore find very useful. Therefore, as with the explanation about 'pre-shaped narrative' above, ChatGPT is providing me with neat phrases that I can use again. Of course, what I do not know is whether they

have already been used by a major theorist in the past. Before I use them, I will therefore need to check them out for their provenance and cite appropriately.

I then decided to find out more about ChatGPT's basis for evidence for its views. Again, the following extract cuts out a huge amount of elaboration.

ChatGPT: My goal isn't just to agree or disagree but to critically engage with the evidence and underlying assumptions. ... I would carefully examine: The Nature of the Evidence ... How 'Existence' Is Defined ... Alternative Interpretations ... Does it avoid essentialising cultural differences? ... Does it account for how culture changes and overlaps? ... Does it resist reinforcing power hierarchies?

Me: But here you are presuming that essentialising and power hierarchies are bad things

ChatGPT: The issue isn't whether they exist but rather: Who benefits from them? Do they allow for change and complexity? Are they based on arbitrary or imposed divisions?

Here I suspect that, in its reference to 'essentialism', its response is largely influenced by what it already knows about my own work – ironically at a time when I am periodically unsure about the usefulness of the term. While I feel a reassurance in its apparent attitude to 'power hierarchies', this response reinforces my anxiety that ChatGPT would be able to provide whatever argument its user might be buying into, depending of course on the data it has access to.

2.9 Conclusion

There is therefore a sense that ChatGPT is able to feed on whatever positionality one brings to it. Returning to the issue of how to manage the collection and analysis of highly intersubjective interview data and the writing of ethnographic description, the contribution of ChatGPT leads one not to return to naïve positivistic checks but to move further forward to be more aware of one's own and others' positionalities.

Hence the attempt, in the constructing of reconstructed ethnographic accounts, to represent opposing grand and personal narratives and discourses through characters in conversation (Agar, 1990: 77-78). One must however *never* speak for anyone else whose narrative one can only imagine. Therefore, in my own demonstration of creative non-fiction (Holliday, 2022b), Stefan, who is a little bit like me, witnesses Roxana being Othered in the workplace seemingly because of an imagined cultural stereotype. He makes sense of this through consulting another colleague, Alicia, who informs him of the Orientalist trope. There is no attempt here to create an evocative experience of or to speak for Roxana; but Stefan can begin to locate the origins of his own and

others' prejudices. The reconstructed ethnographic account remains in the third person with minimal, need-to-know elaboration. It is thus a study of competing narratives and discourses.

With regard to May, she may benefit from being invited to analyse the narratives and discourses present between the lines of the description provided by ChatGPT – a critical discourse analysis – and being taken back to her own experiences of being Othered. The ethnographic description, or the making, choice and arrangement of interview text should therefore itself become the focus of analysis to reveal the discourses and narratives of the researcher as well as the other people involved.

ChatGPT is therefore a producer of texts which themselves embody discourses and narratives. These texts can only represent the discourses and narratives of the people who create it and whatever ideological positions that drive them and the users who ask it questions. If it imagines the evocative nature of, for example the experience of a so-labelled culturally 'foreign' patient in a doctor's surgery, this is likely to represent not the reality of the patient, but of the dominant narratives and discourses that imagine the exoticised culturality of the patient. It cannot experience the patient directly but instead only what the research and other textual material it has access to can tell it about patients and research on patients. It can never be used as a source that has itself had direct experience of social life. It is therefore, probably by its own admission, naïve because it is driven by the same biases that are present in the textual material and research it has access to. Therefore, while it can take us to corners of textual material that we as individual researchers have not yet seen, and can also give us turns of phrase that we might not have thought of before, it cannot by itself take us beyond established knowledge.

ChatGPT's ability to produce immaculate text in terms of clean sentence structure, and being able to suggest new wordings that might better communicate difficult concepts is a major resource. There is however the risk that in doing so, as with much published material, ChatGPT can provide a language that might give the appearance of convincing argument when there is none. ChatGPT can therefore be complicit in providing the language necessary to make an apparently convincing argument out of thin data and insufficient evidence. I have made the point that I do not believe that May intended to deceive. However, using ChatGPT did not prevent her from providing a description that looked convincing but that was not a true account of what actually happened. Had I not noticed the probable contribution of ChatGPT, that in-effect made-up description could have been influential in future research and thinking. Here it is the user who is the problem not ChatGPT itself. Hence the need to learn how to engage with ChatGPT, and how to question what it gives us and how it might be mirroring our own preoccupations and agendas – and how to continue to interrogate what it provides.

Note

1. Using the basic free version of ChatGPT between June 2023 and March 2025.

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