

From small cultures to the varicultural flow: situated deCentred social action

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This chapter will present the small-culture approach as a deCentred methodology for putting aside the dominant and essentialist separated cultures model and its colonising origins in naïve positivism and structural-functionalist sociology. The example of two so-labelled 'home' and 'international' students will demonstrate how, through the everyday process of small culture formation on the go, they find, in the varicultural flow within which cultures are constructed, the threads of hybridity necessary to put aside essentialist 'us'-'them' blocks. This process is enabled by a series of disruptions which push them to take creative social action in combatting both the global and institutional Othering and preculturing forces that persistently and disruptively act against them. This also involves them in critiquing the nature of their social action and, through recognising its situated relationality, and distancing it from the Western, 'flag-waving' grand narrative of methodological individualism. This example connects with the wider global disruption of Othering, prejudice and discrimination.

In this chapter I revisit how a small-cultures approach, with its recent extension the varicultural flow (Holliday, 1999, 2025), combats the cultural stereotyping, by its nature Othering and racist, implicit in the still dominant notion of separated cultures. I will exemplify this with a fictionalised ethnographic account of an interaction between two university students who together manage to get past the cultural prejudices that are set to turn them against each other. This example will address the Othering of so-labelled 'international' students and its neoliberal institutionalisation within Western universities (e.g. Collins, 2018; Merabet, 2024; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009), which connects with the nature of cultural Othering everywhere. It will also attempt to reconcile the social action element of the small-cultures approach with accusations of a methodological individualism perceived as in opposition to the relationally implicit in epistemologies of the South (e.g. Canagarajah, 2018; Dervin & Jacobsson, 2022). Here I write with full awareness of my own limitations as a Western researcher. There will also be implications regarding the nature of hybridity and the application of the 'trans-' prefix to culture and language.

I will first look at how my small-culture approach relates to the notion of disruption, then at how it opposes the dominant separated cultures model, and then at the relevance and methodology of the fictionalised ethnographic account. I will then present the account and its implications.

Destructive and creative disruption

Collins and Merabet (this book) distinguish between destructive and creative disruption - the former being the crisis to which the latter must respond, but also *revealing* the nature of the crisis which informs the new thinking and methods that activate the latter.

The Othering of so-labelled international students, which I use as my main example, is one element of the destructive disruption implicit in the sustained and widespread Othering of particular national and cultural [page 91 ends here] groups, now more visibly acute by particular conflicts and populist politics. While there are multiple sources of Othering everywhere, this disruption reveals the sustained power of Orientalism (Said, 1978) that feeds a patronising West as steward discourse and English native-speakerism (Holliday, 2015; Holliday & Amadasi, 2020, p. 17) in which all so-labelled 'non-Western' people are falsely constructed as culturally disabled (e.g. Delanty et al., 2008). Also revealed are the impact and falsity of particular dominant research methodologies. We see how the falsely apparent objective truth of these positions is fed by a naïve yet rampant positivism that claims Western rationality in defining and measuring in effect 'us'-'them' cultural division. This false 'truth' can be traced to influential work of e.g. Hofstede (2003), inspired by structural-functionalist sociology (e.g. Durkheim, 1964/1893), and critiqued as 'abstracted empiricism' (Mills, 1970/1959). It is then possible to appreciate that this positivism and structural-functionalism, which are naïve in their denial of intersubjectivity and of the implicatedness of the researcher, have been a major colonising force to which the West has also been victim (Quijano, 2007).

Such realisations then fuel creative disruption in intercultural research which enables new and liberating assertions such as the boundary-breaking notions of 'vibrant realities' and 'material' and 'everyday' interculturality (Collins, 2021; Ros i Solé, 2024; Ros i Solé et al., 2020) and necessitate and legitimise new methodologies. My own creative use of autoethnography enabled me to make unexpected sense of living and working in Iran in the 1970s and of a recent stay in a hospital outpatients, revealing hybrid modernity and the varicultural flow once I could put aside my own residual Orientalism (Holliday, 2022a, 2025).

From small cultures to the varicultural flow

The idea of small cultures came from a creatively disruptive experience of a curriculum project in India (Holliday, 1999, pp. 257–258; 2005, pp. 120–122) where there were conflicts not between 'British' and 'Indian culture', but between particular academic and project cultures within the Indian establishment. This resonated with the common use of 'culture' as in the phrase 'there is a culture of ... in the workplace that needs to be changed', or as whatever is going on in any random slice of social life - as 'the culture' we see down a microscope.

Such small cultures can be directly observed, experienced and described everywhere in families, shops, friendship groups, and so on. They can be interacted with and change on a daily basis. This *on the go* aspect has underlying processes the experience of which we all share. Hence our ability to identify with characters and events in fiction, drama and cinema,

or with [page 92 ends here] the daily struggles of colleagues, in settings across the world despite huge diversity of cultural styles and environments.

Hence Herrera's final comment in her ethnography of a girl's school in Cairo that, despite all the practices, sounds and systems, it had an overpowering resonance with the school she went to in San Francisco (1992, pp. 80–81). A cynical rebuff might be that she is only noticing those features which fit a Western template imposed by globalisation. On the other hand, our essentialist imaginations of 'the foreign' can lead us to focus only on the 'exotic' and *block the threads* of resonance which are there if we can make ourselves look for and notice them.

Cultures are not permanent things that people belong to or reside in, but passing creations that mean different things at different times and in different ways to each of the people involved. They are socially constructed realities (Berger & Luckmann, 1979/1966). These constructed cultures are the black modules on the left of figure 1, which is developed from the original small culture diagram (Holliday, 1999, p. 255). The black lines indicate how this construction is the result of the agency of looking and acting.

Figure 1: The varicultural flow vs. separated cultures



The *varicultural flow* is the complex material, marked on the figure by multiple grey dotted lines, within which constructed cultures are embedded. It represents the immense cultural diversity all around us which varies gradually in the same way as the multiple lenses in varifocal glasses. This flow is also the basic material which enables threads to be formed. As it flows across and through constructed cultural boundaries, it is the [page 93 ends here] underlying intercultural experience from which we can all draw as a resource. We can think of these as threads of hybridity because they are enabled by what all we share across the varicultural flow.

Pulling together this sense of an ongoing negotiation of constructing and constructed cultural realities is the core concept of *small culture formation on the go*. The fictionalised ethnographic account will exemplify how this is a constant, everyday process of sorting the threads of hybridity that bring us together from the ever-present essentialist and Othering

'us'-'them' blocks derived from the dominant separated cultures model which I will now look at.

Separated cultures

On the right of the figure, in sharp contrast to the varicultural flow, is the separate cultures model. It asserts the colonising naïvely positivist structural-functionalism, referred to earlier, that creates 'us'-'them' essentialist blocks. The 'onionskin' layers imply that everything we do is locked in and functionally explained by the next layer up to nationality and then to civilisation. This means that there is no way that I could identify with what happens in a classroom or a family in 'another culture' because everything about them is locked in and determined by that culture and essentially different to my culture. Hence the widespread industry of 'cross-cultural training' in what to know about and how to adapt to the 'other culture' that we are 'travelling to' or 'dealing with'.

The following false logic therefore becomes possible: 'Western culture and everything in it - all its universities and classrooms - is individualist with critical and independent thinking in its essential nature.' And subsequently, also false: 'students from "other cultures" cannot be like this because their cultures are essentially different - and they cannot integrate and do well unless they learn this new culture of behaviour'. This is therefore the basis of the rampant 'preculturaling' of so-labelled international students in universities - *presuming* who they are and how they think, before we even meet them, on the basis of established cultural profiles (Merabet, 2025). It is thus an easy support for and explained by Orientalism.

This separated cultures model also supports the native-speakerist view of English, which, as caught in one of the functionally interdependent layers in the same way as classrooms, is perceived as 'native' and confined and functional to falsely imagined Western culture attributes. This therefore supports the essentialist notion that to learn any language requires learning 'its' culture, and vice versa - with the consequence of conflict with one's own separated culture.

This structural-functionalist separation of cultures has a farther reaching impact than methods for how cultures are described. It feeds and [page 94 ends here] justifies the Othering of groups of people, communities, countries and civilisations in ways that falsely appear objective and unprejudiced. This goes beyond social science and everyday stereotyping to tacit justifications for Othering, marginalising, persecuting, colonising, ethnically cleansing groups of people throughout history. Its highly seductive nature also creeps into how we all talk perhaps too easily about cultures, whether large or small, as separate units that we might compare, 'trans-'and so on.

A decolonising break

The small-culture varicultural flow model therefore represents a decolonising break from the positivist, colonising structural-functionalism of the separated cultures model. It follows the advice of Stuart Hall (1991a) that beginning with the small, looking around at what is going on nearby, is necessary to bypass colonising structures.

I will now demonstrate this in the fictionalised ethnographic account. The two university students, Meg and Dan, find themselves questioning preculturing definitions of who they are that have been imposed by University structures. They then find unexpected cultural threads that bring them together while respecting their diversity. There are a number of disruptions that enable this.

Sometimes referred to as creative non-fiction (Agar, 1990; Holliday, 2022b), a fictionalised ethnographic account allows a broader 'looking around' than can be acquired in more traditional data collection such as interviews in which we only see a small part of the picture. The third-person description of how several characters interact with and think about each other is able to present the often conflicting discourses and narratives that they each represent. The characters are composites of a wide range of people that the researcher has interviewed, had conversations with or observed in interaction in a range of settings. I will come back to the validity of this method below.

Fictionalised ethnographic account

The account I present here is a development from two earlier accounts in Holliday (in press). It begins with university student Meg attending an intercultural training session.

High-context cultures?

Meg was thinking about her future career and had seen one of the University careers hub pamphlets about future employers expecting evidence of intercultural awareness training. She watched the online [page 95 ends here] session that was provided by the University Futures Unit. It was quite technical, which made her think it must be well-informed; but then something puzzled her.

There was reference to something called 'high-context cultures' and how they were different to her own 'low-context culture', but that they needed to be respected. As far as she could work out, she would need to be aware of them in the workplace, that these cultures had different values and ways of looking at the world - and that people who belonged to them would not respond with directness or make decisions as would normally be expected. At first she thought this was a type of neurodiversity or disability; but then there was a map which showed that these cultures were in fact most of the world 'outside North America and Western Europe'.

What she found particularly disarming was that quite a few of her fellow students fell into this category. One of them, Dan, had become a friend. It was certainly true that he was 'culturally different' to her. Well, so many of her friends were different to her in lots of ways. But he had a different first language and a nationality which was firmly in the 'high-context' domain according to the map.

She'd been brought up to be cautious with this notion of foreignness; but they both agreed that his country was very different to hers. He'd shown her a video of walking down the street where his family lived. Just about everything

was different - the types of buildings, the high walls and gates that marked where people lived, some of the clothing styles of especially older people in the street, the colours, the shapes, the styles of lamp-posts, shop signs, and so on. When he'd shown her pictures of his family at a birthday party, the food, how the table was laid out and even how people posed for the photograph was different. And there was also physical appearance. However, none of this made him into some sort of alien. She'd found this sort of difference whenever she'd travelled abroad; and there was even an element of it when she visited her friend who lived in a small market town and whose family were so different to hers. Also, the more she spoke with Dan and got to know him as a person, the more she managed to feel that, despite the differences, at a deeper level, she could recognise and identify with the places, styles and people she saw.

So doing this course was certainly making her think again about the nature of cultural difference. However, because of the resonances she was finding with Dan and the images he shared with her, there was something that didn't seem right about how 'indirect' and 'collectivist' people - another term she'd learnt - were supposed to be the sole inhabitants of 'non-Western' cultures.

[page 96 ends here]

She had noticed that Dan was fairly quiet in class and that he said that where he came from students weren't expected to 'speak out'; but she had thought that this was just about what was expected in different settings, or individual personality. She'd worked in a number of shops and knew that some places encouraged comment and critique from junior staff, and some just didn't. These differences were to do with a mixture of the personality of the bosses and shop policy. You therefore had to learn to watch out for what was expected when moving from one to another.

She'd also noticed that a lot of it was to do with looks and body language - actually very 'indirect'. Her friend who worked in the University said that she was often silenced in meetings by dominant males just by the way they looked at you and sat - subtle face expressions and body language. There was similar coercion by friends in restaurants who wanted her to share dishes when she didn't want to. They showed their disapproval through side comments, looks from one friend to another, avoiding looking at her, silences, and lots of body language. This made her think that there was high-context behaviour all around her in her 'own culture'.

We do not know why Meg notices what she does, and why she does not take at face value the theories about cultural difference that she encounters. It may be the particular juxtaposition and timing of events and preoccupations and how they coincided with the training experience. Attending the training event may be the small disruption that jolts her into noticing, connecting and questioning in a particular way - to arrive at some of the thick description that we strive for as researchers. As the account continues, there is another disruption that jolts both her and Dan into taking action that then leads to further understanding.

‘This is my culture’

When Meg talked to Dan about all of this, she was surprised at his negative response. He said that, yes, he did come from what he'd heard labelled a 'high-context culture' - or 'collectivist' or 'relational'. He said that he was warned about this difference by one of his professors at home before he came here to do his masters course - that in the West he'd be expected to always make personal decisions instead of relying on the group - and to speak about them in the classroom. He said this was why the lecturers here looked down on him for being silent and when he showed his respect for published work by not always arguing against it. **[page 97 ends here]**

Then, when Meg told him about what she'd observed regarding her own high-context culture experience, he seemed quite irritated. He actually said that she had no right to suggest that her culture could be like his and that this was just another example of people like him being colonised. He said it was bad enough to be marginalised because of his culture, but even worse to be told that it was no different to everyone else's. He said that she should read some post-colonial theory about the Global North and South.

Meg was obviously disturbed by his reaction. He was normally so friendly. She went away to reflect, but was determined to find some way to get into a more constructive discussion with Dan. She was then very pleased when Dan came and suggested that they try to work this out together.

When he said that this sort of collaboration to solve problems was what he brought from his culture, she pointed out that he had also taken personal action to suggest it, and that collaborating to solve problems was also something that she was used to. The irony for Dan was his strong memory of working creatively with fellow undergraduate students at home in ways that his teachers here didn't think that he could. They never waited for their teachers to tell them what to do.

Methodological individualism?

They decided to attend a lecture on postcolonial theory. The content was complex; but the concept that resonated with both Dan and Meg was that of 'methodological individualism'. For him, it seemed to connect with what he'd always heard about Western people - that they thought they could 'do whatever they liked'. But with Meg sitting next to him, he was already thinking differently about this. As he got to know people here, he was beginning to understand that, in their personal lives, although different in many ways to his own, there were family and community structures that influenced how they formed and managed relationships. He'd also heard his lecturers complaining about bureaucratic structures that inhibited their freedom of action.

While unlike the expected directness of 'methodological individualism', there seemed to him to be nothing 'direct' about how, in tutorials, he was first told how good his work was before then being told that he needed to be more critical. Indeed, the advice he was given was so deeply nuanced that he found it very hard to read. There was an implication that he was supposed to 'know' about [page 98 ends here] things that were often never really explained. Ironically, it was his professors back home who were far more direct in their instructions. An even greater irony was that, with them, it was easier to work out exactly what to disagree with. Indeed, there was plenty of critical resistance within the student body - in a country where the precise location of power was easier to determine than it was here.

He did though know the counter-argument, from his extensive discussions with Meg. She always made the point that 'here' positions needed to be formulated and negotiated at a personal level and were therefore subtly different for each person. Well, this didn't seem to be the case in what he'd recently seen of the recent US presidential election, where there seemed to be a lot of very explicit group shouting.

For Meg, methodological individualism seemed to be the basis for demonising people like Dan and indeed half the world, via the 'high-context culture' label. They discussed together how this was therefore an 'ideological position'. The phrase they came up with to explain what this meant was 'flag-waving'.

The flags people wave

This then helped Dan remember something about his own family. He had an aunt who was well known for complaining about how everyone on their society constantly 'beat about the bush'. Everyone made fun of her because she used the English expression to show off. She claimed that she was 'straight-talking and said things how they were'. This was *his* translation of what she said. And yet, when he visited *her* family, her behaviour with her husband and children was as nuanced as anyone else's. There was actually a lot going on between them that was quite hard to understand. This was therefore his aunt's own version of individualist flag-waving which didn't actually relate to behaviour in her own family.

He also realised that he'd wrongly accused Meg of flag-waving when she'd suggested how she was surrounded by 'high-context' behaviour in society here. When they talked about this further they began to realise that the issue wasn't about whether or not behaviour was high-context. But when it became widespread flag-waving that demonised foreigners. It was a sort of global superiority complex. They wondered if this was therefore the basis for all the anger about the Global North.

It also occurred to Dan that his old professor who'd warned him about the 'lack of relationality' here was also 'flag-waving'. Meg wondered how aware

people were of flag-waving. When she had [page 99 ends here] asked her friend in the Futures Unit if she knew about the issues with the 'high-context' concept, she replied that the training course content was brought in from a central resource that lots of universities used and that they didn't have the time to evaluate the content. Meg was amazed that someone who was so aware of the politics of marginalisation in the University hadn't applied her criticality to this content.

Dan's initial opposition to Meg's suggestion of common cultural threads represents a discordant positionality which, I believe, is generated by the separated cultures model. On the other hand, their eventual overcoming of this opposition results from their small-culture looking around within the varicultural flow. This brings a movement from an 'us'-'them' to a 'we' positionality. As the account continues, we see them breaking further new ground in turning familiar labels on their heads.

The small 'i'

This exploration with Meg made Dan feel both better and worse. Better because he now felt his cultural experience from home actually helped him understand what he found here. Worse because, instead of just cultural incompatibility, he now saw ideological forces operating against his presence. Where he came from he was also used to that; but what was difficult was that here, ironically, these forces seemed more high-context, hidden beneath a relationality that was denied. Also, it was really good to work with Meg in this way; but there were things about him that she would never understand. He thought she also appreciated that.

A concept from the lecture that they both found useful in making sense of their newfound shared cultural experience was the "the small 'i'". It was difficult to understand, so they decided to go to the source that the lecturer was citing. This was even more difficult; but it helped them to reconcile the 'individualist' versus 'relational' dimensions with the big 'I' as flag waving.

There was a description of a village hall meeting in which the people present were involved in other activities to do with relationships, traditions, family and so on, with an agenda that didn't seem too organised and developed organically. However, they both noticed that decisions were made to hold the meeting and there were also outcomes.

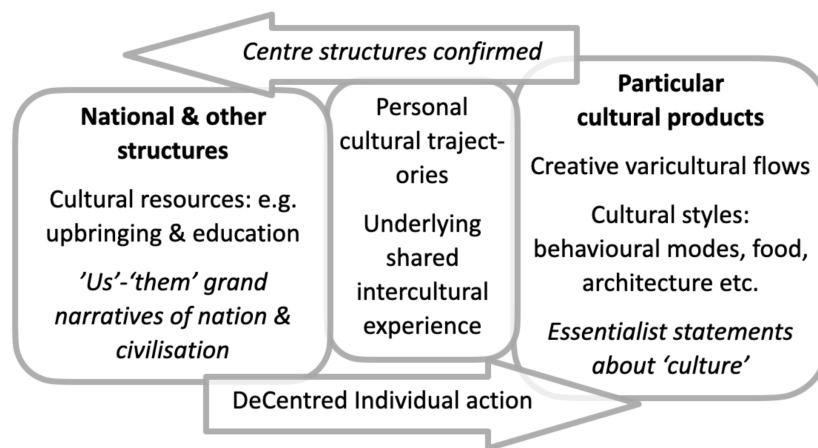
As they were discussing what this meant, something happened that helped take Meg even further into new understanding. Dan, while speaking in his halting, differently accented, but always [page 100 ends here] grammatically correct English, used phrases that she hadn't heard before. It was English, but, he said, translations of concepts in his first language that he had been brought up with. One of these was a phrase that captured excellently how the relationality of the village meeting could coincide with the explicit decisions that nevertheless and at the same time came out of it. Meg was then able to apply this new

phrase and concept to what happened in classrooms and other settings that she was familiar with. And, indeed, the way that she used it, differently to how Dan had heard it used, also enabled *him* to think of things he hadn't before. They both now were able to make their own sense of the term from the lecture, 'translanguaging', which they sort of understood but hadn't been able to think of examples of.

This took Meg back to the definitions to do with 'high-' and 'low-context' cultures and imagined how they would apply to this meeting. It was so tempting to see it in terms of that. But then, Dan was surprised and puzzled when Meg said that there was so much that was familiar in the description. She said that they only had to look around in class at how everyone was constantly preoccupied not just with their phones and social media, but with all the relationships with friends, work and family, often with only a small part of their focus on the academic content. Then there were the often tortuous and mysterious ways in which their lecturers presented their material, clearly mediated by all the other things on their minds. What you saw on screens was only a new and easy representation of all the clutter that had always been in everyone's minds, including their politicians.

Small culture formation on the go

Before looking more deeply at the theory the two friends confront, I want to demonstrate how their interaction and sense-making represents the process of small culture formation on the go. My grammar of culture provides a loose mechanism for describing this. It originates from my initial mapping of small culture formation (Holliday, 1999, p. 249), and has continued to develop (Holliday, 2019, 2022a). It is generally inspired by C Wright Mills's reference to 'the grammar of the sociological imagination' of how the multiple and competing forces of society operate around us (1970/1959, p. 235). Figure 2 presents a recent version, with the essentialist blocks in italics. The organic arrangement indicates how the various domains speak to each other, which should become apparent as I apply it to the experience of Meg and Dan. **[page 101 ends here]**

Figure 2: The grammar of culture

Applying the grammar of culture

When Meg attends the intercultural awareness course, she encounters the block to her interaction with Dan in the form of the grand narrative (bottom left) in which the high-low context division appears to separate her culturally from Dan. She immediately opposes this with the thread of observing high-context behaviour in her own personal cultural trajectory (centre). This is then blocked by Dan's essentialist statement (bottom right) that accuses her of denying his exclusive Global South identity. Dan's subsequent offer to work together is informed by the cultural resources (left) of academic investigation that they both bring from their respective educational backgrounds which, though originating in different national structures (top left), forms another thread between them. *This is significant because the grand narrative about high-context cultures precultures him as not possessing this critical application.*

As a result of the lecture, Dan positions methodological individualism as an 'us'-'them' grand narrative (bottom left again) against the thread within the varicultural flow (right) of how the personal lives of people he has encountered in the West contain aspects of relationality that he recognises. This mirrors the threads that Meg has found in images he has shared of everyday life in his country which, despite huge differences, indicate a higher-level of commonality in the nature of cultural styles (right). He also finds a thread within his own personal cultural trajectory (centre) of the flag-waving 'direct-talking' member of his own family within a relational environment. Another major thread is Meg finding resonance in the description of a relational village meeting in the Global South. This is enhanced by Dan's translingual sharing with Meg of new linguistic forms [page 102 ends here] which are nevertheless recognisable to Meg because of their shared experience of the varicultural flow and the ability to read diverse cultural styles (right).

Both Meg and Dan are therefore taking deCentred individual action (bottom), largely through deciding to overcome apparent differences and work together, and therefore discovering their shared intercultural experience (centre). On the other hand, Centre structures are sustained (top) in that the idea of high-low-context division will continue largely unchallenged, as evidenced by colleagues in the Futures Unit not having time to look into it, and

also by the sustained Orientalism and West as steward discourse that it represents. This represents the securely institutionalised essentialism that Collins (2018) describes as 'interculturality from above'. Meg and Dan's interculturality from below, though immensely powerful, will continue largely unrecognised.

Allowing the unexpected to emerge and thick description

Fictionalised ethnographic accounts are not actual data. They are the analytical result of looking around at multiple data forms. Their validity lies in how far they take the writer to unexpected places through application of the ethnographic disciplines of making the familiar strange and thick description in 'interworked systems of construable signs' (Geertz, 1993/1973, p. 14). My design of the Meg and Dan account took the following dialogic form in constructing their small culture formation on the go.

I had already read Canagarajah's (2018) critique of methodological individualism, and Ferri's brief mention of the small 'i' (2022, p. 384, citing Minh-Ha), both of which I was curious to explore further and gave me the idea of Meg and Dan attending the lecture where they would experience and respond to these concepts. I had also discovered reference to 'high-context cultures' on several university student support websites, and that they came from an established centralised source and seemed embedded in the institutionalised 'interculturality from above'. My reference to a fictionalised university 'Futures Unit' is by no means intended to disparage the very important work that is carried out by such student support entities. It is instead there to draw attention to how, with the best of efforts, we are all taken in by institutionalised categories.

Then, imagining what would happen when putting the two characters together within this context was inspired by long experience of super critical so-labelled 'home' and 'international' students - from observed behaviour, interviews, classroom interactions, and having lived and worked in locations where the latter might 'come from' - with many examples of unexpected diversities and defiance of 'being labelled' among all 'types' of students. **[page 103 ends here]**

How Meg and Dan would interact and what they would do and find out emerged during the process of writing the account. It was their fascination with the small 'i' that led me to read about its origin in Minh-Ha (1989), from which comes the description of the village meeting (pp. 11–12). The idea of ideological 'flag waving' and its association with methodological individualism was unexpected. This was however a further making sense of my locating 'essentialist statements about culture' under the heading of 'particular cultural products' in the grammar (right of figure 2) because they are artefacts of how we construct and project ourselves at particular times and for particular reasons - *not* information about national or civilisational 'culture'.

Dan's bringing of new (for Meg) concepts into their English that helped them to move their exploration forward was also inspired by Canagarajah's (2018) description of a group of STEM academics making creative and innovative use of their multiple linguistic resources. This also resonates with Risager's (2020) reference to linguaculture - carrying identities into other languages, and with Li Wei's (2018) reference to the 'translingual in-

stinct' as a dissolving of positivist language-culture assumptions. This also connects with my long experience of students and colleagues bringing their diverse identities into English helping me make sense of my own cultural background. All of this finding of threads is made possible by the varicultural flow.

That one must however never be complacent about this is in Dan's statement to self that Meg could never completely understand him. This might connect with his allusion to political oppression and *always* being negatively precultured; but this is not developed. Hence Dan's initial resistance to Meg's insinuation that 'we are all the same'. Dan therefore enacts 'hybrid integration' in that he maintains his own personal cultural trajectory as a major resource (Baraldi, 2023).

The politics of (small) individual action

The Meg and Dan account therefore goes some way to allaying the suspicion that the 'de-Centred' individual action (figure 2, bottom) is *not* deCentred because it aligns with the Western-centric methodological individualism which Dan feels Othered by.

My belief that it *is* deCentred comes from Max Weber's 'social action' opposition to the positivism of structural-functionalism. He states that 'collectivities' such as states, nations, corporations and families cannot in themselves 'act' without 'social actions of individual persons' (1964/1922, p. 102). This means that, even when such social action is in the far past, the result of multiple or gradual decisions, or hidden in the details of tradition, there are always 'persons', somewhere in the chain of [page 104 ends here] development, who *do* the colonising, the stereotyping, the Othering, the appeasing, the oppressing, and so on. (See further discussion of the subtle nuance of Weber in Monceri, this volume.)

It is at the core of the small-culture approach that this social action is embedded in the everyday engagement of small culture formation on the go. Here I find it useful to note its similarity with the 'situated and emergent spatial repertoires' which Canagarajah sees in the creative collaboration of the STEM academics referred to earlier (2018, p. 48). It is this situatedness and emergence that he argues distinguishes it from methodological individualism. He describes how they work with 'bits and pieces of words and grammatical structures from diverse languages' where 'activity is the frame of reference, not the bounded grammatical structure' (2018, p. 36). Meg and Dan are doing something similar with fragments of cultural descriptions, images, recollections and so on. We see something similar in how participants work with images, artefacts and memories in their 'walking along' encounters with places, images and artefacts in Badwan et al (2024). Canagarajah's reference to language is similarly boundary-crossing - 'an emergence of distributed practice that involves the thinking and language of multiple parties' and 'diverse verbal resources (beyond labelled languages)' (2018, pp. 45, 48). Similarly, Meg and Dan look at multiple instances within the varicultural flow across constructed cultures. And their recollections from their personal cultural trajectories and what they see around them resonates with Canagarajah's reference to 'collaborating with a network of social agents, objects, and bodies in layered spatiotemporal scales' (p. 48). The break from 'territorialised and essentialised language' (p. 32) I feel has deep resonance with the deCentred social action (bottom of the grammar of culture). It is the small-

ness of small culture formation on the go that enables Meg and Dan to look around and, significantly, become a 'we' in this exploration. Like the STEM academics, they discover and develop their 'spatial repertoire' as individuals, but 'assembled in situ' as a product of their collaboration, 'embedded in the material ecology and facilitated by social networks' (p. 37) - with which they find threads in the varicultural flow.

The difference between this socially contextualised individual action and methodological individualism is subtle but significant. Canagarajah's suggestion that the latter treats 'context' in a 'happy-go-lucky way', without its 'own structure or properties' (2018, p. 35, citing Goffman) certainly fits with the notion of ideological 'flag waving', as Meg and Dan begin label it.

DeCentred celebration of diversity

In conclusion, the small-culture approach, enables a deCentred looking around at the details of social life. It works hard to put aside the [page 105 ends here] destructively disruptive ideological, grand-narrative rumours about who we are, which have been falsely legitimised by naïve positivism and structural-functionalist sociology.

Discounting the presence of separated cultures does not however detract from huge cultural diversity that surrounds us everywhere. The concept of varicultural flow helps to appreciate how this diversity runs in all directions, with a richness that cannot be contained, but in a way that we can recognise if we are able to look. The deCentring of how we can look and appreciate this diversity is to try to remove the imposed boundaries around types of diversity that come from the separated cultures model, and which a number of postcolonial scholars have accused as a colonialist, commodifying, exoticist 'divide and rule' (e.g. Canagarajah, 2022; Hall, 1991b; Kumaravadivelu, 2012; Quijano, 2007; Said, 1993). This also connects with Minh-Ha's assertion that the also divisive 'notions of pure origin and true self - are an outgrowth of a dualistic system of thought peculiar to the Occident' (1989, p. 133).

However, it is important to understand why Dan, the always precultured Other, does not want to consider the apparent antidote of being 'the same'. It is significant, in contrast, that the eventual collaboration with Meg is his idea and on his own terms, with reference to his own personal cultural trajectory, while still resisting the ridiculous loud 'Western' falsely-claimed monopoly of big 'I' individualism. [page 106 ends here]

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