

Small cultures on the go

Blogs 2013-2025

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Preface

This collection of blogs, published over ten years, comments on and engages with the topics that have also featured in my other publications: native-speakerism, neo-racist intercultural prejudice, my grammar of culture, blocks and threads, small culture formation on the go, and the nature of the varicultural.

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

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

Regarding content, readers will be able to find discussion of the following topics with regard to everyday events: small culture formation on the go, the grammar of culture, blocks and threads, native-speakerism, intercultural competence, ethnography, grand and personal narratives, interculturality, the third space, hybridity, culture shock, the varicultural

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[1] Can we teach critical thinking?

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

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

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

[2] Easy questions and easy answers

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

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

I've been asked to write about how to research English and culture. I'm getting into a discussion about modernism and postmodernism; but all the time wondering if this is really the crux of the issue, and even *so what*, and what will people make of it. Then suddenly I find myself writing a sentence which says that it is all about

avoiding 'easy questions and easy answers'. And there I have the core. It might even go in the title. I will certainly make an autocorrect shortcut for it.

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

[3] Talking about culture

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

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

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

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

[4] The dangers of a soft cultural difference approach

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

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

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

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

This soft approach may look as though it resolves all the issues. It enables researchers in their literature reviews to speak cautiously but well of all the old essentialist literature by saying that its apparently harsh Othering does not have be so harsh after all. It also allows students, and parents of students, and textbook writers

and teachers to continue to want or teach their favourite British or American culture as though it is a real thing rather than an attractive icon or brand.

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

[5] The problem with stereotypes

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

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

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

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

Gender stereotypes follow all of us throughout our lives, there is always a 'reason' that someone is the way they are and what that means to others and the impact it'll have on relationships, friendships, etc. However, stereotypes aren't fair, and there are other ways of looking at them, for instance, the term 'beta male'¹ has been used to describe a man who is unsocial and introverted. Those are only a few of the la-

¹ <https://www.knowledgeformen.com/what-is-a-beta-male/>

bels, but in reality that is not always the case. Checking out sites Knowledge for men can help people see an alternative side to these stereotypes.

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

Conversation between two 'international' students:

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

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

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

B: Don't they see their own hierarchies?

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

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

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

B: Getting assimilated like with the Borg.

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

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

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

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

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

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

B: Well we wouldn't be the first.

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

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

[7] Accepting statements

When I refer to *underlying universal cultural processes* I am talking about how we are all equipped to play with culture wherever we go. Sometimes we can make big statements about 'our culture' and how we are different to everyone else. Sometimes our politicians or advertisers do this for us and we resist by insisting we do

not at all conform to the definitions they place on us. When pushed we say that 'in our culture' we are always on time; but then we can choose not to be when it suits. When we are faced by the foreign we can close ranks and exaggerate like mad.

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

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

[\[8\] Why I shouldn't be surprised; and why I sit down](#)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[\[9\] What is intercultural competence?](#)

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

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

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

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

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

[10] Working with narratives

I used two of my narratives from one of the chapters in my new book² in my masters class. We spent time going through them line by line, pausing to discuss as insights and issues emerged. The detail in the narratives worked well as we got into the intricacies of how the characters' relationships and discourses developed. I was pleased because each stage of this development seemed to resonate with the experiences of the students.

The real evidence of their validity was when at the end the students suggested other things that might be going on between the lines and other depths and possibilities for the characters. And I began to discover things about these characters I had invented which I hadn't imaged before. I was also pleased that when I presented the students with empty categories of cultural action they were able to be quite creative in suggesting what to put into them. Then it became evident what they had understood which I also hadn't imagined. Discourses of culture are to me difficult concepts; but it was the students who were suggesting which should go where and even re-evaluating my descriptions of them.

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

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

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

² *Understanding intercultural communication: negotiating a grammar of culture*, 1st edition, Routledge 2014.

[11] Making ethnographic narratives

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

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

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

[12] No evidence

When I read novels by writers from supposedly very foreign places, like Nadifa Mohammed's *The orchard of lost souls*³, about civil-war-torn Somalia, there is absolutely no evidence of the non-Western cultural strangeness one might be led to expect. In this novel, the political and economic conditions are extremely and unbelievably harsh. The three women characters suffer extreme deprivation and aggression. Yet their humanity shines through in a way which is supremely recognisable. They are people just like anyone anywhere in the world, but living in particular and harsh circumstances. As such they draw on cultural practices which belong to them and their region. They dream of the traditions and foods of their parents and their youths and the old imageries of the better days of their surroundings. This may be where the particular nature of their cultural backgrounds lie; but these traditions and imageries are accessible to any reader who is prepared to say that these are 'human beings just like us'.

[13] Stepping out of the convenient

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

³ The *Guardian* review can be found at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/sep/14/orchard-lost-souls-nadifa-mohamed-review>

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

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

However, in English language education across the world we don't have this innocence. The 'native speaker' and 'non-native speaker' labels are divisive in a profound manner. There is now no doubt that they represent 'us'-'them' images of proficient versus deficient culture, and also touch on the nasty realm of skin colour. And yet, these labels persist as though they are harmless - referring to colleagues or student teachers as though they are a useful way of distinguishing one from another. And, I'm afraid to say that it seems mostly true that while the labels sound innocent they always carry at least a tinge of judgement about something cultural - time keeping, dependability - those 'us'-'them' references that keep on seeping between the lines and never go away.

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

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

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

[\[14\] 'Native speaker' and 'non-native speaker' labels?](#)

Further to my last blog, my attitude to the 'native speaker' and 'non-native speaker' labels may have something to do with my own professional trajectory. I don't recall them being used at all when I took up my first teaching job at the British Council in Tehran in 1973. Half the teachers were Iranian, including one of the people who first observed me teach. It was all to do with who could teach rather than what their

childhood first language was. At the same time I was surrounded by Iranian people who spoke English in my wife's family and amongst friends; and I never thought of the label in connection with them.

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

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

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

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

Second, native-speakerism begins not with the labels but with a far deeper and implicit neo-racist imagination about superior and inferior cultures of teaching and learning. This native-speakerism is therefore deeply and often invisibly behind any mention of the 'native speaker' and 'non-native speaker' labels. This means that whenever they are used within the domain of international English language educa-

tion, this insidious neo-racism stands behind them, perhaps with the excuse of the modernist need to define and prescribe.

[15] So what is culture?

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

However, there is something else going on. Boundaries are often constructed for us by others - governments, education systems, advertising, the media, all sorts of groups (family, sports, religious, occupational, commercial and so on). Each of us also take part to lesser or greater degrees in these constructions, depending on the power we possess. Strictly speaking, these boundaries are features of whatever culture we are looking at. So it is part of the culture that such and such boundaries are constructed in such and such ways. However, for a lot of people it is not the constructions of the boundaries but the boundaries themselves that are defining features.

This is complicated though. We may inside ourselves know that they are constructions; but for various reasons we will declare that they are real, especially in times of difficulty when we need to work hard to assert ourselves against others. And these assertions themselves take on particular senses of reality. Perhaps the more we are under pressure the more they seem real. And when our strongly asserted realities are pitched against different ones asserted by others, then we might go to war. The difficulties that accentuate these realities can be economic or political - scarcity of resources or lack of power and status.

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

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

[16] What to do about multiple identity constructions

Getting on with my new article. I have been really helped by recent discussions with research students about how people identify themselves and how we identify them. It seems to me a matter of fact that all of us present ourselves in different ways at different times and for different reasons. We all employ different discourses of culture and align ourselves with different cultural groups, which sometimes seem in conflict.

It is difficult for researchers to know what to make of this complexity. What is important is the issue of the time - the particular injustice of the time. So, if huge numbers of people across the world are not recognised for who they really are because of false messages that come from the Centre, then we need to listen to what people have to say about that.

[17] Reading good fiction

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

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

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

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

[18] The issue of values

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

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

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

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

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

[19] Talking about cultural difference - blocks and threads

There is no question at all that we are culturally different to each other because of the way we are brought up in different nation states. So much of who we are and what we think is influenced by educational, political, economic and media systems that are often specific to national structures and policies. Then there are life-defin-

ing resources to do with climate, physical geography, and agriculture, some of which can also be influenced or even determined by national and geo-politics.

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

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

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

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

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

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

On another occasion I am with a young Chinese man who is taking me in his car to a conference. (It's his job to look after me for the day as a visiting speaker.) Imagining his age and perhaps noticing some young children things on the back seat, I use my re-

cent experience with my daughter and grandchildren to talk to him about childcare, how being a parent impacts on his career and so on.⁴

I suppose this is not unlike making conversation a lot of the time. But we do have to work at it - searching for resonances. While cultural difference is still on the agenda, the effect can be to open up possibilities for sharing and crossing boundaries.

This does however mean that the act of talking to people about cultural difference, whether in interviews or in conversation, or in the sort of interpersonal research cultural travellers may engage in, there might be something strategic to do - to get to talking and thinking that gets us to new places of understanding about who we are and how we can be together. For the first time, surprisingly, I can see a route here through to a possibility for intercultural training!

[\[20\] Moving between blocks and threads - sharing humanity](#)

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

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

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

Finding and recognising cultural threads that we can share is so important in finding the humanity that we share. It is so important that when we see images of the migrants who are desperately trying to cross boundaries in Calais and Kos, to understand that these are people in so many ways just like us, with whom we can have conversations about things that have meaning for each of us - relationships, family, having children and grandchildren, professions, being employed, being valued, the daily struggles with identity, conflicts within our families and at work, going to

⁴ The two examples later appeared in 'Difference and awareness in cultural travel: negotiating blocks and threads', *Language & Intercultural Communication* 16/3, pages 318-331, 2016, and Holliday & Amadasi, *Making sense of the intercultural: finding deCentred threads*, Routledge 2020, pages 52-3.

school, being taught, hating being taught. These days we might even have seen the same movies, TV shows, read the same books, heard the same childhood stories. How we do these things differently, how we bring different meanings to them, because of our different upbringings and backgrounds, is what is so exciting to talk about and to learn about from each other.

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

[21] Engaging with foreign places

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

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

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

Now I can see why I was so interested in TV dramas, pop music history and cultural references when I lived in Iran between the ages of 23 and 30. I was never a great language learner; but I think I did learn about the locatedness of things - what was going on and why it was going on - where people came from and the histories that gave them meaning. Somehow this helped me to think about who I was too.

As my dear colleague Sue-san Ghahremani-Ghajar told me - when we travel to foreign places we can discover that 'their stories are also our stories'⁵. But we need to search hard for this connection; and we can only do it through thinking about cultural threads - not the blocks that keep us apart.

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

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

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

[\[22\] Blocking threads and threading blocks](#)

Following my posts about blocks and threads, further writing, and having spoken about them at the IALIC conference in Beijing, here are some more observations⁶.

We cannot be naïve about the simple value of threads - about pulling threads from our own cultural experience to meet with those of others, and thus to begin crossing cultural boundaries. Threads can indeed be a valuable means of achieving interculturality and breaking prejudice. And we must seek them out and struggle to make meaningful contact wherever we can. However, there will clearly be times when this does not work, or may seem to be work when in fact the opposite effect is taking place. It goes something like the following:

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

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

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

⁶ [International Association for Languages and Intercultural Communication.](#)

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

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

[\[23\] What to say about nation](#)

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

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

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

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

However, the non-essentialist turn tells us is that none of these influences are confining. The essentialist view gives the false impression that we are all encased within national cultures as though they are boxes that contain, define and restrict everything that we are. The fact of the matter is however that nations are not like this, that people have cultural natures that can extend and travel beyond them, and

that there is huge diversity within them. While nation can sometimes be defined by its physical borders, its influence on the cultural natures of people who live there cannot be defined.

In all circumstances it can be said that nations have cultures, in the same way that all human formations each have cultures. Saying that something has a culture means to me that there are processes going on between people and institutions in that something that construct norms - ways of doing, ways of speaking. But these things that have cultures are part of the huge proliferation of cultural formations, most of which are small and all of which are in the process of change, as indicated in the centre part of the grammar.

The constructing of norms can be top-down, bottom-up or sideways-in; and it does not mean that everyone conforms. Cultures of behaviour may also be regulated - laws, training, hierarchies and so on; but there will also be a politics of resistance. Nation might indeed be the least recognisable and the most distant from the everyday culture formations that we are engaged with at the local level, though invoked at times of conflict. National culture as a concept therefore belongs more to the domain of ideology and narrative than something that can be described.

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

[\[24\] Narratives as dark matter](#)

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

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

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

This is evident anywhere at any time. But let's take the more 'exotic' example of sitting in the foyer of a hotel in China and talking for a moment to the young woman serving me coffee. She seemed as uncertain as me whether the group of people walking in a loose procession nearby were a wedding party - because the European-style dress of the woman at the front who might be the bride was pale blue.

The narratives I brought to this were: large hotel foyers being places where weddings spill out; wedding dresses are special to the people who wear them but follow traditional styles; people who work in hotels have local knowledge; people don't know everything about their traditions; people share the desire to talk about what puzzles them; weddings have strong resonances of some sort with everyone; white European wedding dresses are popular everywhere (reference to brides posing for photographs on bridges in Cairo); particular wedding dress styles are particular to particular communities for particular reasons. Most people still opt to have a traditional wedding with white dresses, like those found on the internet for example. However, other cultures will have different wedding traditions where people may opt for dresses that are unlike the usual white that we see. This is often to keep with the tradition of their country or religion.

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

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

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

[\[25\] What is it possible to say and think about culture?](#)

In a non-essentialist approach we try to avoid using stereotypes to define and confine the characteristics of members of 'a culture'. We recognise that national or ethnic cultures are largely 'imagined' - ideologically defined, the constructs of political, nationalistic militaristic or other such agendas and narratives - carved by the mod-

ernistic structures of nation states. Nevertheless, a lot of people continue to find the concepts meaningful and want to be able to talk about them.

I for one want to be able to say that when I first went to Iran I became absorbed in the culture - without insinuating a bounded exclusive thing that defines the behaviour, values and attitudes of all the people who are somehow considered to be 'in' it. I want 'Iranian culture' to imply a more porous set of practices, productions and influences that at goes beyond, inspires, but doesn't confine people. I want it to imply something big - a huge canvas that people look at, contemplate, have their lives changed by, creatively contribute to, and indeed infuse with particular values, histories, principles, and so on - but can pass in front of, walk away from, challenge, change, take part in from foreign places, appreciate from great distances, and be who they want to be within its sphere.

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

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

Where culture, whatever it is, can be seen to be working in a describable manner is in one's immediate vicinity, wherever you one happens to be near people. I have been looking back at what I said in my 1999 'small cultures' paper⁷. I define small cultures as 'small social groupings or activities where there is cohesive behaviour'. At the same time, when we think about what we can say about small cultures, it helps us to see what we can say about culture in any circumstances.

We all seem to know how culture operates in the smaller entities such as companies, families, sports groups and so on. We can commonly talk about how the culture of our organisation, or of the other department down the corridor, or of our own department needs to be changed, is changing, is like this or like that, is conducive to this or to that and so on. And I don't think that when we do this we get carried away and imagine that all the people who work there are somehow defined by these cultures to the extent that the culture becomes the essence of who they are - in an essentialist way.

When we leave the place where we work at and go home of meet our friends in a sports club, we might join with the spirit of the cultures that we find there and be-

⁷ Applied Linguistics 20/2, pages 237-264. The full text can be found at <http://adrianholliday.com/articles/>

have in very different ways. Of course we will also have our own personalities, histories, anxieties, dreams and preoccupations that will mediate how we move between and make sense of these cultures.

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

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

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

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

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

There seems to be a great irony here. I am arguing that at the small culture level we can begin to see how large culture imaginations and claims come to be. It can also be argued that the people who spin these imaginations and claims are treating culture as civilisation as though it were a small culture. They are attempting to pull

the big canvas of human experience down to the level of an organisation or a company or military unit. This can unfortunately be a highly successful enterprise, at least for the short term. But as with small cultures, as soon as people have the opportunity to leave, they will not be confined.

[26] About boundaries of cultures

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

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

This is what is expressed in this diagram, that I have been carrying with me since it first appeared in my 1999 'small cultures' paper⁸.

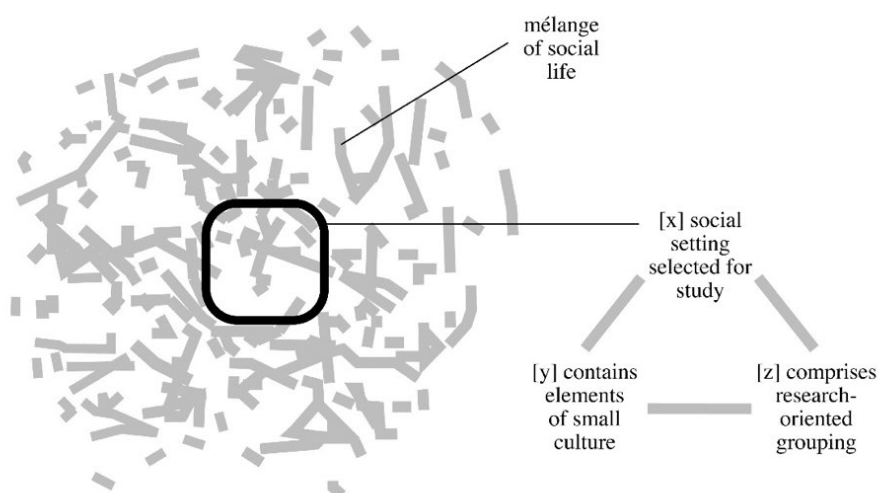


Figure 3: Small culture selected for ethnography

The point is that the boundaries of a culture are from our own sense-making. They are operational. We, as researchers, or simply as people looking at the world, imagine boundaries around whatever we are looking at to serve the operation of looking.

⁸ *Applied Linguistics* 20/2, pages 237-264. The full text can be found at <http://adrianholliday.com/articles/>

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

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

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

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

'Small cultures' are therefore all operationally defined segments of the wider real activity of culture. Culture everywhere is a seamless extent of human activity. Small cultures are bits of this extent of culture - bits of culture. They really are like, therefore, the slices of the biological world that we put under a microscope and call 'cultures'. And whichever slice we look at we will see culture taking place. Different

slices, 'small cultures', will, on the one hand, have particular characteristics because they are from different places in the uncountable whole.

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

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

Going back to the question, therefore, of how possible it is to work up in the demarcation of separate 'cultures' from small to large - well, it is simply that the bigger the operational slicing or segmenting, the greater the ideological adventure, or imposition.

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

[\[27\] So what do we mean by intercultural?](#)

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

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

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

Thinking about intercultural in this bottom-up way does not help us to define, predict or explain the behaviour of national or ethnic large cultures. This is not the purpose at all of thinking about the intercultural within a non-essentialist, postmodern

paradigm. Instead, the purpose is to help us make sense of the world around us wherever we find it. It is therefore more akin to a sociology of culture or cultural studies.

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

[28] Researching with others - slices and segments

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

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

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

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

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

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

Oh yes, I can sort of see what's going on here. Yes, I also know what it's like to have a task to do with rules set by other people but that I'm trying hard to make my own. This researcher wants to look

formal and at the same time open - aware that she might be imposing, or appear imposing, but also wanting me to be myself and feel comfortable enough to intervene, but not too much, of course.

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

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

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

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

[\[29\] Multiple locations for research](#)

A few days ago we visited an estate agent because we are trying to sell our apartment. We were contemplating getting into an 'authentic country living' situation, as one of the signs on the wall said, as we felt that the move from an apartment to a house would be better for us at this stage. We decided we're not too worried about where we move because our friend recently told us about a company that can move your vehicle for you. If anyone else is moving across the country, you could always 'check it out', as another sign said, to see if you need this service too. This means we don't have to worry about staying within a certain mileage from our current home because they can deliver our car to us regardless.

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

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

After a while, another employee came and sat with us. It was interesting how he presented himself, how he made us feel comfortable (which he may not have done!), how it was possible to get him into small talk. But it wasn't small talk at all. As a researcher I was trying to find out from him what the rules were for consuming refreshments in the workplace. I'd noted that there were no coffee tumblers on desks and that no-one was walking around with them as they did all the time in the university.

I shared this with him for a moment to see how he responded. He had asked us if we wanted some refreshments; so there was a way in. A lot could be learnt from what he said and how he said it - about identity, culture and power. It was even possible to get into what sort of work discourses he had to deal with. When the other person finally arrived there was a lot to notice about how they interacted with each other - how apologies and the possible embarrassment of how he had covered for her were managed. Gender management in a social climate where we are supposed to be so careful was certainly there to be watched.

This might all sound too much - getting on with researching even at important times like going to the estate agent to negotiate the life-changing event of moving house. But researchers can't avoid doing this. In fact I think that everyone does this all the time anyway - the natural phenomenology that Alfred Schutz reminds us we all do as 'strangers' to the things around us in order to get on with life. As researchers we externalise these natural processes.

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

Also, I am both observing and taking part in small culture formation on the go. It helps me not just to write but to work out my own social tasks. It is crossing the

boundaries between the familiar and the strange. It helps me to go and get my expenses refund in the bank in Doha; and that experience helps me to talk to the people in the estate agents and to find the intercultural threads to get a little bit into their world which is a foreign to me as the bank in Doha. And perhaps speaking to them also helps me to get through the day in my own workplace.

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

[\[30\] Why we should stop using native-non-native speaker labels](#)

This blog responds to queries after my recent presentation at the BALEAP⁹ seminar at Nottingham Trent University. Why do we need to stop using the native-non-native speaker labels? Are they really neo-racist; and what does 'neo-racist' mean? Are there no occasion when these labels can be used?

One reason for not using native-non-native speaker labels is that we don't need them and can do better without them. I do not believe that 'native speakers' and 'non-native speakers' actually exist outside the particular popular and academic discourses that produce the labels. People who speak languages in different ways, with different histories, and with varying degrees of competence in different settings exist all around us.

These labels can never do justice to this complexity. If we discipline ourselves not to use the labels we will be forced into a more thoughtful discourse in which some of the politics of how we think about the use of language might become evident. A lot of writing that I see would not lose anything at all and would indeed be enriched without the labels. Years of normalisation and reification of the labels has created an easy, uncritical shorthand that has got us nowhere but a between-the-lines encouragement of prejudice.

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

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

⁹ [British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes.](#)

ture' that one can find in commercial textbooks and that we might have been brought up with since primary school.

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

So what exactly is the 'between-the-lines encouragement of prejudice' that is implicit in the native-non-native speaker labels? Here we need to look at the native-speakerism argument - that the labels are underpinned by an ideology that constructs people who we label as 'non-native speakers' as culturally deficient. This ideology is widespread. It is forged in the everyday talk that touches on language and cultural identity and in the scholarly articles that represent an imagined objective 'science', and then celebrated in the supposedly innocent talk of language teaching professions.

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

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

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

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

We should only ever use the labels when we are critically discussing their impact as items of discourse, and never as though they refer to actual, real groups of people. This is not the same as using sexist labels for gender or the equivalent for other groups. What the native-non-native speaker labels refer to do not actually exist at all. The whole thing is either the product of or convenient material for native-speakerism.

[\[31\] Achieving interculturality](#)

This is the last section, page 179, from the new edition of my book,¹⁰. It should be coming out in the New Year.

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

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

Regarding global positioning and politics, she engages with her own opinions and the opinions of others that reflect the values associated with the cultural practices that concern her. Despite being positioned as non-Western or Westernised by others, she is able to

¹⁰ [Understanding intercultural communication: negotiating a grammar of culture](#), 2nd edition, Routledge 2018.

negotiate and counter this positioning and find herself within it. She nevertheless faces prejudices, and how far she is able to overcome them remains to be seen as her personal cultural trajectory continues into the future.

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

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

And there is more ...

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

[\[32\] Cultural rhythms](#)

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

said that they needed to walk fast to go about their business and were constantly stopped from doing this by crowds of tourists.

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

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

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

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

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

However, saying that this is a large culture thing might just be a convenience - a framing that we have got used to because of methodological nationalism. There are

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

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

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

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

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

[\[33\] The man in the café](#)

An interesting example of what we might call 'cultural difference' is the man coming into the café where I am sitting in Canterbury who orders an espresso at the counter, stirs in the sugar with particular panache and then drinks the coffee there and then without sitting down, and leaves. Yes, he speaks Italian to someone. This

resonates with the attention I attracted among friends in Italy because I drink my espresso slowly and say that I can make it last for an hour. I therefore presume he's Italian. But of course he might not be.

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

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

An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness ... it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition. Likewise the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated ... that needs no proof can never really, in discourse, be proved.¹¹

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

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

[\[34\] 'Your English is so good'](#)

What would be the conditions for it to be OK to congratulate someone on their English on first encounter? I don't somehow think it's enough that they might be just

¹¹ Homi Bhabha, 1994, *The location of culture*, Routledge, pages 94-95

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

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

[\[35\] Café Naderi](#)

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

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

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

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

The student's apparent excitement indeed matched my reason for showing the photograph. It was part of my point that self-directed critical discussion is not only found in the 'Western culture' that claims to monopolise it. The photograph was juxtaposed with another one of a seminar at Tehran University in which the lecturer and students are sitting around in the sort of animated discussion that many people

think can only happen 'in Western universities'. (I remember myself being surprised, pleasantly, at the very high level of extremely well-informed discussion when I did a question-answer session with students at Tehran University twenty years ago.) The fact that all women in the café are wearing hijab might also lead people to imagine, falsely, that there might be traditional restrictions against such 90-year-old 'modern' café life.

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

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

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

[\[36\] Small culture shock](#)

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

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

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

Small culture shock is about what is going on around us. My first memory of small culture shock was going to school for the first time. What was significantly different about going to Iran were the Orientalist grand narratives of national or civilisational culture that I took with me. These were the things that initially got in the way of me

seeing people just as people and enabled me to build theories about who they were when things got bad. I had picked these narratives up throughout my childhood and early adulthood from stories, books, radio, television, education, between the lines of everyday language, so on. In the 1950s and 60s the imagery was far less rampant than it is now; but it was still very much there. So many children's books were full of images of a culturally deficient Other derived from stories of empire.

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

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

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

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

[\[37\] Putting theory in its place again](#)

One of the comments on my last post about my use of 'Orientalist grand narrative' as a core concept in my book made me think again. Thank you for that Mona. It made me realise that the book is not about the Orientalist grand narrative, but in-

stead uses it as a major theoretical construct against which to position my main theme.

My main theme is how hybrid deCentred threads can be found in small culture instances that are at the core of my experience in Iran. The Orientalist grand narrative was and still is the major essentialist Centre threat to finding these threads even though I was not aware of it at the time.

Being driven to this realisation necessitated another major reorganisation of my introductory chapter. Instead of beginning with the Orientalist grand narrative, I have now placed it in second place to an initial discussion of hybrid deCentred threads and small culture formation on the go.

As a general principle, more well-known, and hence more seductive theoretical positions should not be allowed to dominate. They too easily mop up attention. We should use them, but show clearly how they are used. They should not be allowed to crowd out our main ideas.

I like to use diagrams; but I have to be careful with them. Often they are more for me to make sense than useful for my readers. I therefore often delete them once they have served my sense-making purpose. However, in this case, a small, very simple diagram helped me a lot to clearly place the Orientalist grand narrative in secondary place.

The reorganisation has also required a lot of reconnecting - new transitions between blocks of writing that are now in different places. These new transitions in themselves forced me to clarify my thinking even further. The blocks themselves also needed breaking down and writing better.

[\[38\] Basic researching and writing skills in teacher training](#)

One of my PhD students recently did a short certificate training course in teaching English as a foreign or other language. As a full-time student in her final year, time is short and needs to be well used. So one might wonder if doing this course was a good idea.

I think yes, certainly. I remember what I learnt from the Cambridge certificate training course I did in 1973 - probably the first year it ran. I had already got a postgraduate certificate in education to qualify me to teach English, history and sociology in secondary school. That gave me the philosophy, sociology and psychology of education, which the Cambridge course I think lacked. But what it gave me that the postgraduate course didn't was basic communication skills that were crucial far beyond classroom teaching - in professional life and in research and writing. I can trace much of what I think I'm able to do now back to a number of crucial skills that I learnt then.

First, planning lessons taught me to sequence the delivery of ideas and evidence with an audience right there in front of me at every small step.

The second and third skills were how to ask questions and how to design tasks and their instructions. These involved precise wording, design and also sequencing. In research, this helps us to design interview questions and to set up the right conditions for research events. In writing, this helps us involve our audience in the task of reading our work by helping them to piece together the various elements of what we present and to act upon what we want to say in the way that we want them to act.

These skills were enablers for the crucial fourth skill of elicitation. This is how to activate what Kumaravadivelu refers to as 'the intuitive heuristics of the learner' (in his classic, 1993, 'Maximising the learning potential' paper). I didn't learn about the notion of underlying communicative competence until years later in my masters course. But in the certificate training it was made very evident that my audience of language learners had tacit knowledge and intelligence with which how I presented my material had to engage.

In writing, we need to plan carefully how we select and sequence our material to best elicit the 'intuitive heuristics' of our readers - to help our readers to get what we are writing about. I think that, as writers, we often forget that we are communicating with an audience that needs showing and having their attention directed not so unlike the students that we teach.

To know how to elicit the intuitive heuristics of our language students we need to research who they are. This requires direct observation not just of how they 'perform' in the classroom, but of everything we can see of them in the classroom, in the corridors, as they come into the classroom, in the library or the cafeteria, and wherever we can find them. What we learn about them is also informed by our knowledge of people in all walks of life.

Something very similar applies to writing. Knowing how and what to write involves an ethnographic understanding of the wider academic community to which our readers belong. This can be acquired not just from what members of this community write in books and journals, but also what they say and do in lectures, tutorials, conversing in common rooms and tutorials, what they post on office doors and departmental corridor walls, what they put on their office shelves and desks.

It is also not unconnected that the first step in the classic ethnographic research cycle is looking around in the research setting to see what's going on - to work out how we are going to approach our participants and what methods we are going to use.

Therefore, in conclusion, successful teaching requires researching our students so that we can effectively engage them and elicit response through sequenced ideas,

questions and tasks to bring them to desired learning outcomes. Successful writing requires researching our audience so that we can effectively Successful research requires researching social settings and the people in them I think we can here fill in the gaps - and also for professional scenarios.

[\[39\] Learning wherever we are about the people in our research](#)

These are further thoughts, following my last blog, about how we continue to generate meaning throughout the writing process and that research doesn't finish once the writing has begun.

Perhaps we carried out interviews, and that stage is now finished. Perhaps we are no longer directly in contact with the people we interviewed. Perhaps we carried out research in a specific place a long way from where we are now. Perhaps we are analysing a text written in a different place and time. What we however need to remember is that those people, locations and writers are part of human society that we continue to see around us every day.

Once we can get around and begin to dissolve the awfully divisive blocks that a history of cultural essentialism and stereotypes has imposed upon us, everything begins to look different. I am currently writing about my time in Iran in the 1970s. A distant place and a distant time. However, my direct observation of people around me now in Britain continues to teach me about what was going on there and then.

At the level of small culture formation on the go, while there are huge differences in how people behave, there are also huge similarities. But we have to put aside the stereotypes and grand narratives about separate national or civilisational large cultures before we can see this. They are not a good place to begin. They create a false lens that distorts everything. The people we are researching are like us and the people we see around us now, but brought up in different circumstances.

To do this requires a familiar-strange-familiar eye. One has to feel to a degree an outsider to be able to see through an apparently routine thinking-as-usual. We may think that the people in our research have traditions and beliefs that only belong to them. However, everywhere, wherever we look, in certain aspects of our lives, people follow tradition and have beliefs from which we can learn about those of others. How they dress, what they say, how they look at and move around each other, what they believe about the world relates to everyone.

The content of these traditions and beliefs may be different in different places; but their form, how they are structured, follows underlying universal cultural processes. If we, as observers, are insider or outsider to what we see around us, we need to find a way to get above and between its lines. Then we begin to see the deeper intercultural that takes place in one way or another everywhere. And this will take us

deeper into whatever we researched elsewhere and whatever we are writing about it.

So, while writing, if we also look around where we currently are, we will see relationships, juxtapositions and conflicts that will help us think again and more deeply about what is going on in an interview transcript, a piece of text, a picture, a video sequence, or whatever we are looking at. This is regardless of how far away in space or time it originated.

This means that a good researcher, wherever they happen to be, will always be looking around them to help them understand what they are writing about. This may indeed be partly unconscious. Just putting ourselves in locations where things are going on will automatically allow a deeper sense-making to take place.

My favourite location is sitting in cafés. When I do this I am working. I need to find the right place to sit, to have the best view of what is going on. Another is sitting in the bus station and then on the bus in the short journey from town to home. Another is sitting in my car in a busy supermarket car park.

Another is watching a particular Egyptian drama on Netflix with the subtitles turned off. This is because, a bit like Jane Austen, it dwells on the details of how people dress, walk, look at each other, face expressions, demeanour, perceptions of social position, the architecture of locations. I know just enough Arabic to pick up whether people are greeting or arguing - like the tiny snippets of conversation that one can catch in the café or on the bus.

More generally, I have been lucky in my travels often to find myself in locations where I only understand bits of the language but enough of the nature of locations. When I was doing my PhD in Egypt, I often sat for long periods of time outside the university dean's office waiting to be asked in. Once in the room it was the custom to continue waiting with a number of other people, some in small groups. So I spent time watching them as they approached the dean's desk and postured in their different ways to get what they wanted.

Recalling the detail of what happened in an Egyptian university dean's office will therefore help to make sense of transcripts of interviews with British whoever or American political speeches.

The reference to Jane Austen also draws attention to the value of reading good social observational literary fiction. I hope it now makes sense, what a Chinese student once told me, that reading Jane Austen is a good preparation for travelling to China.

[40] The dangerous nature of an intercultural encounter

There is something culturally different but familiar about the people at the next table in the café. I theorise about their background from how they dress, stand, their features and so on. Then I get a better clue when I recognise the language they are speaking and can even understand some of it - helped by familiar gestures and body language.

I'm cautious about thinking of nationality. They could be first or other generation British. I can somehow tell they are middle class.

Then one of them recognises me; and when he pulls down his face mask I see who he is. We have met occasionally over the years. So now I know his nationality - though clearly British plus this nationality. He tells me he works for the local Council.

The English we speak to each other is of the sort that I only speak with people with his background. It's not the accent or vocabulary, but the choice of references, of topic, the particular type of warmth, the things that are understood, between the lines, because of some common history. He knows that I've lived in the city where he was born and grew up - the streets, buildings, interiors, sounds, the distant mountains.

I ask him when he last went 'home'. I feel safe now that this is an appropriate question because I believe that he knows that I know something about the politics. I feel I have crossed some form of boundary of familiarity. He says just last year. For me it's nine years. When I suggest that there are qualities you can find 'there' that you cannot 'here' and vice versa, I get a strong sense that he knows exactly what I'm talking about; and he says he agrees absolutely. I've heard this so many times from people with his background.

It's taken me a long time to work out how to write about this. A simplistic interpretation is 'meeting people from a different culture that I know something about because I've visited it and learnt its language'. This is firmly in inverted commas and to be put aside because it's essentialist, limiting, divisive and reductive, if not racist.

Nevertheless, I did say 'culturally different but familiar'. I could say this about anybody - for me, football players, actors, BBC employees in the café outside the BBC in London. I would then also be indulging in all sorts of theorising about who people were. If they were, to me, 'just British', or something like 'American', it would be things like class, occupation or political alignment I might instead be theorising about. 'Nationality' would be a shifting concept with different and indeed political connotations when set against concepts such as 'migrant'. The idea of where somebody 'comes from' is then highly charged, dependent on the politics of belonging and who is asking it of whom.

But my theorising about the people at the next table is also a lot to do with me. I'm still relying on rumours, or perhaps even stereotypes, about what their behaviour might be despite my long experience of direct observation and my explicit and well-known agenda to put these aside. I'm easily falling into the trap of forgetting that people with whatever background are as diverse as anyone else. Like everyone, they make momentary decisions about how to behave based on all sorts of factors - family relations and histories, individual personalities, what happened an hour before, conflicts and aspirations, and so on. Am I not choosing bits of my impression of 'their culture' to feed by own hunger for the exotic.

Neither must I exoticise the linguaculture thing. Whichever language we speak, large or small, it will always change depending on who we are speaking to - their communities, interests, histories, all their discourses, and so on. There is therefore nothing that 'special' about this happening with this particular group of people. Can I be excused for emphasising how I speak with them because I'm very consciously contesting the dominant false belief that language is fixed within national culture?

The reality is that the intercultural is always shifting and uncertain and operates in 'small' domains. This 'smallness' does not however in any way diminish culture as identity and inspiration - figurative aspects of civilisation, nation, history, home, ancestry, and all the big things that we need to belong to.

Sometimes we also need people to know about our backgrounds - about the cultural things that we identify with. It's good that I have some knowledge of the background, architectures and civilisation of the people I encountered in the café. It's good that I've been to other places and found broader perspectives. We should never however, despite our good intentions, use these big cultural things to stereotype, define or confine other people, or indeed ourselves. This certainly isn't a matter of interacting from one 'culture' to 'another'.

This thinking is clear to me. However, I need also to appreciate that my feeling the need to say how much I understand the people at the next table is more to do with me feeling the need to say something about my own history than with them.

This was indeed an intercultural encounter, but not because of the 'culture' of the people at the next table - instead, because it leads me to position and reposition myself.

[\[41\] What is a small culture?](#)

Is a small culture an actual place with boundaries, or is it a shifting, transient, 'on the go' collection of practices and values which has just enough permanence to be recognisable?

Let's consider a small shop in the high street. Its natural boundaries might seem clear - the definable space inside where the people who work there and customers and all the things for sale and advertising them reside, plus the window for display and the bit of street in front. More debatable might be the store room at the back or the place where the employees take breaks. The designations of these physical domains will be constructed differently by each of all the people involved, depending on what's going on and how they feel.

This physical place is not however the small culture. It is instead the sum of the cultural behaviour that takes place within it. Again, all the involved people who either pass through or work in the shop, or who go there to research it, will have different subjective accounts of what this is, and, in-so-doing, will contribute to and change the culture.

Part of this may also be a particular corporate culture that the management have constructed as part of the shop's ethos or brand. This will demand a particular style of customer-facing behaviour of the people who work there as well as the fabric of all the artefacts of selling. This could be strong or weak, subtle or explicit.

Where it is explicit, as soon as we walk in, we find ourselves in a very different place from what we are used to. The assistants behave differently to how they do in other shops. There are innovative signs, displays and employee dress, perhaps with a strong colour image. COVID social distancing might bring another layer with issues of personal safety and anxieties about how we should behave. There will also be a specific language - a discourse - in the artefacts, signage and layout and how the employees speak.

Engaging with any of this, whether we work there or pass by, is small culture formation on the go. Everyone needs to work out how to respond - to stay or leave, challenge or confirm. This positioning will depend on all the cultural practices and values that all parties bring from elsewhere. The small culture is not therefore a closed entity, but has negotiated, shifting, porous and imagined boundaries, all of which, again, will be different to all involved parties.

This means that even a tightly designed corporate culture is negotiable by all the employees. They all need continuously to position themselves - to make daily decisions about how far and in what ways to conform - perhaps because they are inspired, worn down, or have bigger goals and dreams. Even when they conform to the practices and values of the culture every day when at work, they are not confined by it. Each bring and go back to diverse behaviours and values from the rest of their lives.

There is therefore a sense of transience for all the people concerned.

The question is what can we learn from this about how culture operates everywhere.

[42] Beginning with the small, but what we need to know

Watching intercultural life while sitting and writing in a café. I take out my earphones to listen.

At one table is an older woman waiting for two other older women queuing to get coffee. At a second table is an older man with a younger woman, perhaps his daughter. The daughter turns to speak to the older woman and asks her if the other women are her sisters. The older woman seems pleased to say that they are. Indeed, they do in some way look alike. There is a sense of pleasure and genuine fascination passing between the two tables in sharing something valued about relationships.

The daughter turns back to her father who then points to another nearby table where there is a little girl, perhaps three or four, sitting by herself. The little girl seems to be showing huge pride in arranging her own drink and a small toy, as though she is playing at being an adult customer with her own table. Something about her demeanour makes me think that she is perhaps Middle Eastern or North African.

Further along is a youngish man sitting in an arm chair watching the little girl. Around him are a sofa, another low chair and a lower table and full shopping bags. He shouts proudly across to the older man that the little girl 'is interested in everything except her father'. The older man replies that he knows all about this and looks back to his daughter who also smiles with recognition.

After a short while the three sisters and the older man and his daughter leave. A woman in a hijab and another child come and sit with the younger man and his daughter who is now also sitting with him. I guess they are a family group. I try to catch what language they are speaking but can't. But then it seems very clear, because he is pointing to the tables where his daughter and the older man were sitting, that he is telling the hijabi woman, who I think must be his wife, about their daughter pretending to be an adult at her own table and the older man commenting. The hijabi woman smiles, I am pretty sure, with proud approval.

What has taken place between these three families is a good example of threads - resonances that bring people together and dissolve boundaries. It is an example of the 'getting on with life' grand narrative that Sara Amadasi and I have written about recently - which is where we can live and communicate with each other, and share our resonances, in appreciation of all our diversity, natural hybridity and differences in background. It is something that has always been there and can always be there - when we do not feel threatened by people who are different to us - when we can momentarily escape from the other sort of 'us'-'them', essentialist grand narrative that fills our minds with racist hatred.

What is very worrying, and what makes this difficult to write, is that even as I watch, I can feel this other 'us'-'them' narrative at my elbow - trying to tempt me into its familiarity. It lures me into that other way of thinking, hiding its prejudice under the guise of well-wishing. The West as steward discourse. So I find myself also falsely wondering if this family with the hijabi woman is somehow 'liberated' by 'coming to the West' - somehow 'integrated' in 'our freedoms' - so that they too can appreciate, as they never would have before, the individuality and creative self-direction of their daughter sitting inventively by herself.

But no. I must not be lured! This is not well-wishing! It is a denial of who they are - of who we all can be. I need to be reminded that in all my experience I have never met people who would not appreciate this creative individualism, unless it was because of the narrow prejudice that one can find in any society, anywhere.

This is what we need to know in our observation of cultural life. That no-one has a monopoly on things like individualism, self-direction, creativity, freedom of thought and so on. These things might be more explicitly institutionalised in some places than in others. But we must be very wary of institutions. Beginning with the small really does mean that we have to put aside dominant cultural assumptions.

The 'getting on with life' grand narrative is discussed in chapter 5 of Holliday & Amadasi, *Making sense of the intercultural: finding deCentred threads*, Routledge, 2020. The West as steward discourse is discussion on pages 17-20.

[\[43\] Involving the everyday in researching the intercultural](#)

Whenever we research or involve others in researching the intercultural it is an immense resource if we can connect with everyday experience. The intercultural is not a distant place to do with foreign lands and international travel. It is all around us all the time.

Also, researching the intercultural begins immediately whenever we talk about it in classrooms, seminars or wherever else we engage with students, colleagues or whoever. I think here not just about my teaching, supervision, and writing alone or with others - but also of the huge privilege of spending time with my grandchildren in cafés, where we look around to make sense of what is going on. There is great richness here in going with others, in the references we can make as we talk, into the domains that they inhabit.

An example of this is when we discover that our students work in restaurants or some other location. Immediately there is direct experience and observation to explore, and places to go in which they are already expert. It is also the case that we all also explore such places in such as television dramas and the stories that others tell us.

In a recent encounter with a student, I was concerned about how they were writing about individualism and collectivism as national cultural traits. It was already clear to me that my own academic prejudice was at work as I forbade them to use such reference because I think they are essentialist if not racist. This anxiety made me think again and, as a result, look around for material with which to further test my assumptions. This is the nature of ongoing investigation that we must never relax from.

As a student who had read about the concepts in passing but had no reason to know about the literature and the paradigmatic past of intercultural studies, as this was not her main subject of study, I could not simply state a theoretical position.

Sitting as we were in the library, I had already, in a previous meeting, referred to a conversation I'd overheard among a group of people sitting nearby - of course, I hope, displaying proper caution regarding anonymity, respect and privacy. The student remembered this and reminded me of it. I then thought about my earlier blog about a shop in the high street - its culture of branding and staff behaviour.

It then occurred to me, perhaps for the first time ever, that this was where there could indeed be a meaningful application for the concepts of collectivism or individualism - as a feature of a particular corporate culture, as established by employers, or even organically emerging from the people who worked there and the customers who passed through. The important point being that all the people involved pass through the culture as part of their lives, either in professional engagement or as momentary customers, and then move on to the other cultural realities that they engage with, none of which define or confine them. They may refer to these 'cultures' as representing their identities for numerous reasons; but in reality the process is transient.

So I suggest a particular shop that the student might know, and another to compare with it; and these provide moments of perhaps shared experience upon which to base our now sharing of analysis. I also remember that they work in a restaurant and ask them how their experience there fits in with our now developing analysis.

I also make reference to a film I recently saw on Netflix, *Boiling point*, which the student can also go to, which is itself a remarkable and detailed analysis of the shifting and complex nature of the culture of a particular evening in a restaurant, which illustrates how multiple identities and positionings intertwine to make up the 'on the go' cultural nature of the place.

I now find it all the more meaningful to refer to my concept of small culture formation 'on the go'.

We thus help each other in the transporting of our attention to particular locations, the nature of which is at the core of good ethnography. And so the research contin-

ues. This is an everyday research into who we are and where we go which is surely the purpose of education.

[44] Colonisation and interview as commodified data

It is easy to think that the increased attention to decolonisation is a bandwagon which feeds a neoliberal tick-box activity, and that anyway I've already been addressing it under the heading of deCentring. However, focusing on the concept does lead to a renewed sorting out of thinking.

Then I heard someone say that we are colonising our research participants when we use for our own purposes the data that they provide for us.

This accusation shook me because I never thought that data was some sort of free-standing commodity that could possibly 'belong' to me. I have indeed felt strange the common suggestion that interview transcripts might be 'stored' as 'data sets' or used by other researchers - as though they are transportable hard data.

Critical researchers acknowledge that in interviews all involved parties are engaged in fleeting acts of positioning. Multiple factors to do with settings, the politics of labelling, feelings, relationships, shifting histories and trajectories, what happened that day, the hour before, power, status, and so on, mean that what is actually said may change from moment to moment and has much to do with the presence of the researcher.

In this fluidity, the only thing that a researcher can 'own' is their own memory and interpretation of what might be going on. The 'data' must also include them and all their acts of positioning that deeply implicate them in whatever their interactants choose at any moment to say.

It helps me to think of the interview as another example of small culture formation on the go where all parties are encountering practices and values that cause them to position and reposition who they are.

All researchers can claim to 'know' is that the event took place, what sorts of things were said on both sides and what they think about it.

This is why it seems to me superficial when data sections or chapters uncritically offer extracts of transcripts as examples of what interviewees 'think' or 'believe' with no laying bare of the politics of how the transcripts came to be. Even when they claim decoloniality or post-structuralism in the opening sections.

Returning to the question of stealing data, I think that it is indeed colonising if researchers presume that what interviewees say is a commodity that can be carried away and stored for use elsewhere. One gets this sense of plunder when researchers refer to it as 'my data'.

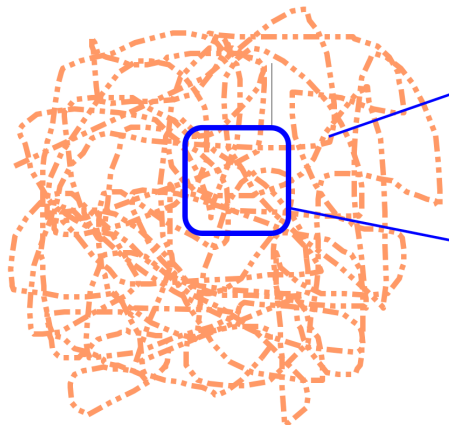
I begin therefore to feel that decoloniality can only begin to be achieved if there is a full discussion of the politics of the presence of the researcher and the intersubjectivity and positionings of all present parties.

This also has something to do with the location of relationality. My recent reading of decolonisation theory tells me that the colonising position, following Orientalism and essentialist theories of the intercultural, maintains that the so-labelled Western, individualist, rational and objective researcher imagines themselves independent of the so-labelled relational, collectivist, irrational non-Western subject. It is this fallacy that falsely but powerfully enables brute positivism.

Researchers everywhere must not therefore be taken in by what just appears to be objectivist rigour.

[45] Varicultural reality

Every so often we can come up with an idea that helps us to understand other ideas that we've been struggling with. This is a fragment of the diagram from my small cultures paper in 1999, and then used again on page 42 in my qualitative research book.



The orange represents seamless varicultural life. The blue lines, segmenting and pointing, represent 'cultures' that we construct for multiple reasons carved from the varicultural life that flows everywhere.

Saying that cultures are constructions does not mean that they do not 'exist' or are not 'real'. They are at the core of our identities from nation or civilisation to family, food, sport or the workplace - to two friends deciding to present themselves to the world in a particular way. They express the huge diversity in practices and values between communities and groups of all types. They are also influenced or imposed by political orders, religion, education systems, geographies and so on. The blue segmenting therefore represents large or small acts of positioning, differentiating

and reifying. It is important to see that this is social, political, cultural, organisational action.

What this is not is 'cultures' that have somehow always been there that might now be blurred by globalisation and newly rapid communication systems. The belief that the bounded bit comes first and then the messy stuff seeps out is likely to be the result of 'us'-'them' national or civilisational grand narratives. Even the notion of 'transcultural' seems somehow to imply a liberation from original essentialist divisions - where threads are found as some sort of new cultural learning across boundaries

It is by putting aside these narratives that we can begin to see, by looking around is, that cultural flows have always been there - later cut into, segmented and rationalised by such as national boundaries or indeed colonising forces.

The varicultural world is therefore the original canvass of human life from which cultures are built, move and change. This means that cultures are never original but rather formed creatively from this basic material. It is this common, underlying material that makes it always possible for all of us to find threads that can connect us. We are not therefore creating threads between essentially different, separate cultures, but instead clearing away, digging down through baggages of difference to find and liberate what has always been there in our basic humanity.

The notion of varicultural came from thinking about the gradual variation in my varifocal glasses during a conversation with my co-researcher, Sara Amadasi, about the problem with a dominant 'us'-'them' bifocality. I then found the term used, in this connection, in this poem by Michael Shepherd.

[\[46\] Making sense of ourselves and others in varicultural settings](#)

The small culture diagram from the last blog can be used again and again.

In my small cultures paper I compare the blue bounded part to the slice of biological life, often termed 'a culture', one might look at down a microscope. However, in social research, the bounded part is not disconnected from the varicultural world around it. The flows continue to run back and forth and through and provide the threads that connect us all together and which, when we find them, help us to overcome prejudice.

This helps us to understand how to escape from the positivist myth that the researcher is somehow separated, as objective, rational and individualist, from the relational, irrational, intersubjective researched.

This observation connects with postcolonial argument that it is this positivist illusion of the Centre, Western, positivist researcher who is the only rational agent in sorting out the indolent Other.

What the diagram helps us to understand is that the blue segmented part is itself an intersubjective act of sense-making - choosing to look at a particular slice of the varicultural flow of social life. We construct and make this as a 'setting'; but we must never forget that it's our construction and that the other people in the so-labelled setting each have their own realities that might not fit with it. Indeed, every person there is also imposing their own blue slicing of the reality around them for whatever reasons they might have at any particular moment in time.

It is this multiple slicing by all the people there of varicultural reality that is the basis of intersubjectivity. This makes the research event in itself a prime example of small culture formation on the go. In such as an interview, we might think we are re-searching what other people say and therefore think about the intercultural; but in fact we are researching our own intercultural experience of what others think, say and do about the intercultural when we are present. Whatever they choose to say, they think or do in the interview is a complex moment in their own intersubjective management and slicing of the complex varicultural world that surrounds them. All of us in this varicultural momentary meeting place is the data.

[\[47\] The difficult business of finding deCentred threads](#)

I recently spent a week in a German town, going to work every day to the university. Despite my huge experience of travel, I had difficulty dealing with particular unfamiliar cultural practices.

There were cycle lanes on the pavements and at pedestrian crossings; whereas in Britain they're in the road. It took me time to work out the rules for which part of the marked pavement and the road crossings they were - sometimes wider, sometimes narrower, on the right or on the left. There was the added strangeness that pedestrians and the cyclists only crossed the road when the light was green, whereas 'we take the initiative' to cross the road when it's red if there's no traffic coming.

So, for the first part of the week I frequently got in the way of the cyclists, who were numerous and vigorous in getting quickly on their way. And I was angrily crossing the road when I shouldn't and perhaps risking fines. This was indeed culture shock. But shock about what?

The biggest block was not the practice of cycling in the street but the prejudices I brought with me which I fell into as a resource. These were the common stereotypes about 'Germans' which, when I analysed them, went right back to my childhood. It would be sensationalist and embarrassing to repeat them here because they are in every respect racist and recall misplaced historic discourses that are best put aside.

I laughingly shared them with my co-researcher on WhatsApp and she jolted me into taking this more seriously and find a way to deCentre my thinking.

I therefore, first, needed to recognise and then put aside these awful stereotypes. I could then look for threads with my brought experience of, throughout my life, adjusting to the varicultural world around me by learning how to negotiate and behave with new rules, albeit with varying degrees of success.

Threads are drawn through the multiple events of our personal cultural trajectories, where we all possess an ability to read, respond to and work out culture wherever we find it. Our underlying, shared varicultural knowledge allows us to do this.

This searching for threads, consciously separated from the prejudices that surround us - from the 'us'-'them' grand narratives often derived from national or civilisational opposition - is a refreshing and deCentring experience.

I felt a sense of pride when I found myself adapting to the rules of walking in the street, but with the full agency implicit in strategic intercultural action. If I stayed longer, this would contribute to normal cultural change that takes place everywhere.

I was then able to put this experience into a wider perspective when travelling by train in Britain a week later. The train was hugely crowded. Passengers getting on were avidly looking for vacant seats. A woman and child across from me had left their seats to go to the toilet. Two young women approached the seats. Because of the particular questioning and puzzled looks on their faces, and other things in their appearance, I imagined they were 'foreign', as I was in Germany.

They seemed to be wondering if the seats were vacant even though there was a bag there, but just on one of the seats. Another passenger sitting next to me, perhaps because she also thought they were 'foreign', told them that 'the seats are taken' and that it was 'a mother and child' - as though the 'child' strengthened the claim on the seats. Perhaps everyone thought that if the young women weren't 'foreign' they would 'know' the unwritten significance of bags left on seats.

I then wondered if these young travellers knew they had the life experience to draw threads like I eventually did in Germany. Indeed, is sorting out threads from blocks dependent on recognising this experience and knowing what to do with it - on being able to recognise racist 'us'-'them' blocks for what they are?

On the train there was a powerful 'us'-'them' blocking narrative lurking in the air - that 'we respect personal space' as if 'other cultures don't'. Or was the encounter innocent, drawing on the thread that everywhere, everyone, when on best behaviour, respects personal space, but that the rules for doing it might look very different?

[\[48\] Multiple Englishes and native-non-native-speaker categories](#)

I was recently unlucky enough to spend a night and almost two days in hospital accident & emergency and outpatients departments. Suffice it to say that the health

traumas that took me there had by then subsided; and I was well enough to look around and observe the remarkable interactions that took place within very culturally diverse groups of health professionals and patients.

Of particular interest was the use of English. In trying to make sense of what was going on I tried hard to put aside what I consider to be the outdated and racist native-non-native-speaker distinction. This would have such an easy trap to fall into - to falsely divide the people there into so-labelled 'native speakers' and 'non-native speakers' - which would then have led me into 'us'-'them' categories of 'foreign' and 'British' or whatever - which, without everyone showing their passports, would be a very divisive thing to do.

Not allowing myself to do this enabled me to observe deeper and more interesting complexities. All the wealth of different accents, modes of expression, body languages, English in different realisations, simply produced Englishes. But this wasn't 'Englishes' in the old 'inner and outer circle' sense. Indeed, the variety was as much to do with interlacings of age, subculture, small cultures of profession, and enactments of class, status and degrees of authority. One small moment of pragmatic near-failure I personally experienced - 'I've been drinking a lot more recently' (meaning water) - 'so how many units?' (meaning alcohol) - was to do with my own discursal preference instead of where we 'came from'. Indeed, it was a varicultural diversity of English.

In my deep appreciation of all the NHS (National Health Service) people I saw - important to say in these difficult times - I observed that what made communication possible was their sustained professionalism in eventually finding effective ways to communicate with whoever they encountered.

[\[49\] Who says we are not relational in the West?](#)

As I sit in the university computer room, taking Stuart Hall's advice to begin with the small and look around at what is actually going on while I am writing, I watch an ongoing tapestry of student behaviour around me.

As with the hospital outpatients department referred to in an earlier blog, in many ways it's impossible to locate precisely who people are. There are, seemingly, students from a wide range of probable global heritage - perhaps south Asian, far eastern, African, European and so on, on the basis of their appearance and how they group themselves. When I say 'how' they group themselves, I'm not talking about styles of 'collectivism' or 'individualism'. It's more to do with dynamics that I think are common to all of us - getting together with people who look like us, who might have something in common with us - people who are looking for IT help because they're new to the system, perhaps new arrivals, people who we like to be seen with, but also class groups.

This computer room is certainly not a place where everyone sits quietly at their respective PC. Whether by designation or tradition it's a place where students also meet to socialise or work together. There is some table space without PCs and some arm chairs occupying one end of the room.

I watch a particular group who do seem have some sort of heritage commonality. They are talking a lot; and I can hear definite sounds of a particular British regional accent. They seem all women perhaps between 20 and 40, which I imagine is due to a particular demographic of a particular course. What becomes clearer with time is that they are all working on a task connected with their course. They are between six and eight students, as some of them come and go, occupying two rows of tables. Six of them sit with installed PCs, two work on their devices on the other side of one row, facing inwards. They are all interacting together, exchanging ideas, pointing at each others' screens and notebooks, looking up and speaking across to the students coming and going, leaning across each others' spaces. As the event unfolds, all of them, in different ways, seem absolutely on task, talking about what they are thinking, what they will say, what sense they are making, where they agree and disagree, what they have written, how they will present, and so on - sufficiently loudly for me to hear almost every word from three tables further away.

Regarding the other students in the room, in their considerable diversity, I also see other pockets of interactive behaviour. They may look different, dress differently, and have other things on their minds. I hear different accents and Englishes and other languages; but I see no noteworthy differences in the body language of how they interact together. There is no evidence that any group is any more relational - or indeed collectivist or individualist than another.

As I begin to leave, I notice one of the students from the group I describe, whose accent I hadn't heard clearly, joining another group. And I hear what I think might be an eastern European language spoken, at least for the moment when I pass by, between them.

[\[50\] Two woman creating their cultural space](#)

Across from me in the café I see two woman arriving. They have an appearance which some people might consider 'foreign'. There is anyway something particular about how they inhabit and arrange their space. They have brought from the counter a tray with cups, saucers, coffee, and confectionary on plates. One of them carefully and delicately arranges all of these items on their small round table, I think, from her body language, very much with the other, seemingly older woman in mind. It is as though she is trying to make it as the older women would like it. The table is only just large enough for everything to fit. It takes some time, trying different arrangements, moving things back and around, until it is finally sufficiently right and they can both begin to enjoy and consume what they have brought.

This to me is small culture formation on the go. Between them, and between them and all the other people who might be noticing them. Perhaps no words are spoken. But there are concepts in their minds, brought, or imagined, perhaps, from a distant land and history, or from a different sort of household just down the street.

In my grandmother's house, there was a wealth of initially, to me, 'foreign' body language, verbal expression, arrangement of furniture, use of rooms and ways of eating when compared to my childhood home. Indeed, all the things on the dining table were arranged differently; and even the cutlery and crockery had 'foreign' forms, textures and places. Like the younger woman, my grandmother held and moved things, used her hands differently to what I'd seen before.

So this memory is one of many threads with which I can connect with the two women. Perhaps the thread that leads to others more obvious. Indeed, perhaps the younger woman finds the older woman somehow 'foreign' - from another, an adopted or even her own family - trying so hard to make things as she imagines the other would like. Perhaps the older woman is just watching and silently going along with this, wondering why the other is trying so hard. Between them, they might never get to the bottom of this. Small culture formation on the go must never finish. The varicultural world can provide endless possibilities for making sense, finding unexpected threads, as we struggle to avoid Othering.

It was me wondering what the two women were doing that made me remember again and make new sense of my grandmother's house, and then back to them. And then thinking again about how we all create our cultural space - in watching others.

[\[51\] The line \(queue\) and the crowd](#)

A change in cultural activity in the bus station might have something to do with the marked shift in thinking-as-usual that COVID brought. Whereas there has always been an orderly queue (line) waiting to get on the bus, running from the left down the length of the waiting area, there is now a crowd directly in front of the entrance to the bus alongside the queue. It has grown over the past three years from an occasional small group to a new and permanent norm. While at first it comprised different types of people, it is now mainly school children. But many of them are late teenagers, so not exactly a group who can claim special treatment. I say this because when it comes to competition for the narrow space for getting on the bus, there are sometimes older, infirm and people with children and pushchairs in the queue.

I call this cultural change because waiting in line (queuing) has long been considered a core British cultural trait. (It is therefore significant that the location is Britain.) In my lifetime this has though already changed. Now we have snakes in such as banks and airports, the front person of which goes to the next available of a

range of destinations. Also, queues have never been a feature of getting served in pubs, where the crowd format predominates and attracting the attention of the barperson is crucial. This is also changing, where they've adopted the format used in fast food places where there is still a separate line in front of each destination, as there used to be in banks when I was a child, and you had to calculate which line might be moving faster - and in immigration in many airports.

Significantly, the bus station doesn't have either a line or a crowd, but both. There is therefore a choice to be made. Here is the very evident nature of small culture formation on the go - where we encounter cultural practices about which we need to make decisions about how or whether to conform, reject, influence, change, tolerate, stay, or just leave. This can relate to large or small things - from the perceived major fabric of society to family, work, or personal relations - all of which have impact on how we behave in public places - such as bus stations.

In negotiating this choice, blocks (things that invoke prejudice) and threads (that bring us together) come into play.

I would actually feel comfortable joining the crowd. I'm conscious that I know how to do this. It is what I learnt to do well in my early adulthood in Iran, including in driving, where one had to occupy every possible available space in front of one, with determination and finesse, to get to the front.

And indeed I find that I can navigate the crowd quickly and get on the bus early. This might be a cultural thread in that I'm drawing on experience from distant places and times. Another necessary thread is that I don't [block] associate this crowd norm with the Orientalist notion of a 'collectivist indolence' where people are falsely imagined not to respect each other's space and individuality. Perhaps I know this because I've experienced how the crowd in the pub is in fact very individualist in its jostling.

This individualism is very evident in the bus station crowd, which requires active manoeuvring - being highly conscious of each person around me and the physical and mental space that each one occupies. This is therefore an excellent example of where relationality and individualism closely interact. And I remember this well in the dynamic jam of getting through the traffic in Tehran - with constant eye-contact and watching for and interpreting the individual intentions of other drivers - so different to the reliance on static rules and signs in Britain.

I nevertheless mostly decide to join the line in the bus station. This is perhaps when at those moments I don't have the moral energy to innovate. When I do decide to find the energy to join the crowd, I feel the exhilaration of the consciousness of all the threads I draw from across my cultural experience - my personal cultural trajectory across near and distant times and locations. The high consciousness of small culture formation on the go,

[52] We all have stories that we can share

In several of these blogs I take the huge liberty of writing about people I've encountered. This is through my own eyes based on my own history and experience. There will be other parallel, very different stories that each one of them might tell on their own terms with their own histories and experiences. At the same time, at a particular level, they might be very similar with just different detail.

This is the very important sentiment expressed in Saussan-e Ghahremani-Ghajar's Iranian primary school textbook opening:

"The Turtle in our stories travels to different places, she talks to different people, she tells us about other people's stories, and she tells her own stories that are usually my/our stories too!"¹²

In the first lesson one of the turtles travels to South America to visit her aunt. If one of the pupils asks how that can be, the answer is 'why not?'.

[53] Small cultures and intercultural encounters?

I notice some people at the next table in a café. An older woman and man and perhaps their daughter. I notice because I can just hear traces of a language that I half recognise. Then I see something about their demeanour and appearance that resonates with people I've known and places I've been that helps me locate the language further.

I'm also cautious of going off on a trajectory of false theorising. Wary of the huge danger of national culture stereotypes, I interrogate how I'm thinking about this. I know about destructive grand narratives of nation and civilisation that I've grown up with and to which the three people have probably been victim. The pervasive Orientalism that falsely projects the idea that people from 'those cultures' lack the critical individualism that 'we' possess. I know how this splinters down to personal narratives that produce false essentialist statements like 'in our culture we ...'.

The existence of these narratives is further evidenced by the numerous people who have privately told me that they have had to tolerate, to 'put up with' this Othering on a daily basis. They have occasionally used the word 'racism', which I think it undoubtedly is.

So how can I appreciate a sense of cultural difference without falling into essentialist, and indeed racist traps? This is where the small culture approach is crucial. The cultural difference is real. It really is. But at the same time, at the small level, all the people in the café are culturally different in a multiplicity of ways.

¹² 2009, *Secrets of the turtle*, Tehran, Iran: Centre for International Scientific Studies & Collaboration, page 1

Therefore, even if there is something about the behaviour and language of the people that I recognise from a very different place to this, the thing for me to do is to begin with the small as I would with other people there. This is not to deny anything about their cultural identity. It is to open up possibilities that I might not otherwise have noticed.

The man from the table comes into my clear line of view when he stands up and walks past me to the counter. He looks around, assessing the room and who he is in it. He waits a short while in the queue, gets served, and then comes back to his table.

There is a particular cultural style in the way that he does this which is rich and full of meaning and history. But this has nothing at all to do with the stereotypes that would negatively position him. He is not reflecting and assessing any more or less than anyone else there. Everyone in the café must be doing this on one way or another, also rich with their particular histories.

As he stands in line I imagine the images that might be crossing through his mind as references to help him make sense of who he is there. Perhaps waiting to buy bread in his city of birth - the smells, the colours, the bread-makers with their professional code, precision and pride, the ways in which the different types of customers make their requests, projecting their types of families and class, how attempts to mechanise the process were tried and failed, his family's particular method of taking, holding, and carrying the bread home, which he learnt when he was first sent to buy bread as a child.

When he orders his coffee and pastries, I imagine the histories evident in his manner of English, of making eye contact, of showing authority at the same time as respect, and in the pride with which he carries the tray back to the table - having achieved getting what his (probably) wife and daughter want.

Doesn't though all of this indicated a national culture different to mine? Don't the details of the bread-buying that he might be recalling indicate a relationality or collectivism that 'we' don't have in our culture'?

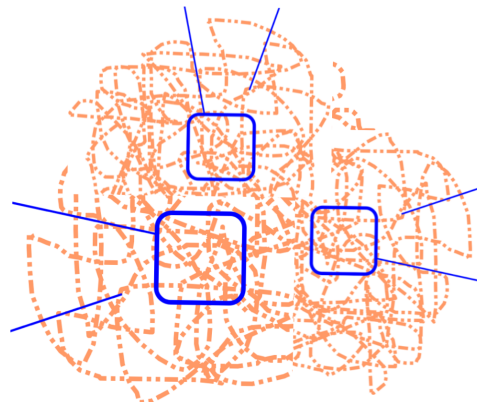
No! Absolutely and certainly not! Although the particularities of bread-buying that he might remember are very different to what I can remember from my childhood, I also have memories of my own that enable me to connect when I am standing in the coffee queue. How I behave and interact there are informed by my memories of being sent to the corner shop as a child, also waiting with my father in the bank on Saturday mornings, negotiating which queue to join, in each case watching other customers and learning about the wider society from which they came, all of which helped me learn how successfully to communicate with the person I want to serve me, imagining also all of their relationships and senses of personhood.

Therefore, in watching the man from the next table, I am not trying to make sense of 'another national culture'. It is instead a small culture on the go process of finding threads of meaning from my own personal cultural trajectory that help me to relate to people around me. Indeed, watching him helps me recover these aspects of my own trajectory.

If I were to speak to him, it would be drawing on the thread of what it is like to make sense of coffee queues and to get the right orders for our wives and daughters.

I am not suggesting here that he isn't associated with 'another culture'. I am sufficiently fortunate to have travelled to places which I imagine might be associated with his background. I have queued for bread with people from there who have pointed out to me the micro behaviours that I imagine he remembers. It was foreign - the architectures of the street, the buildings, the proxemics, the pace of movement, how people dressed, what they were carrying, indeed, how they carried the bread, which was large and hot and difficult to hold. Significantly though, the person I was with, who was born and brought up there, also found some of these things foreign to his family and upbringing. He therefore shared with me his own sense of strangeness and sense-making, which was his thread with me.

But this travel has helped me to understand more what is going on everywhere. There are other people in the café and the queue who, though sharing my national background, are very different to me. Each have their own personal cultural trajectories which bring memories of past experience very different to mine to help them make sense of how to behave and interact.

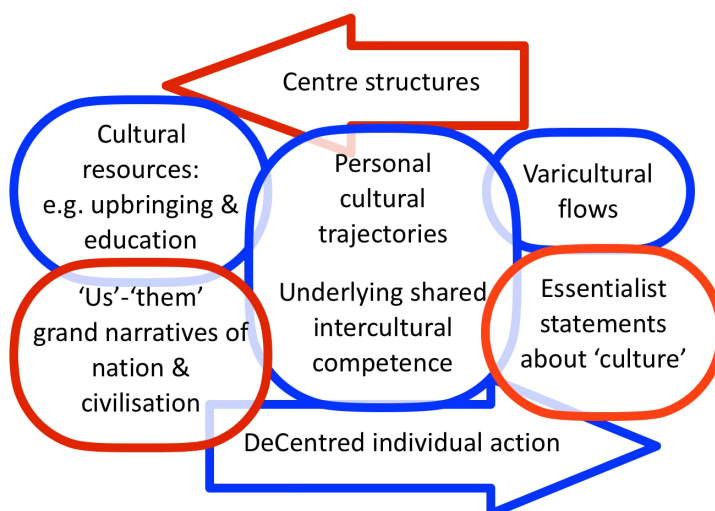


This is the nature of a varicultural world where cultural variety flows seamlessly across all boundaries. This doesn't mean that everyone is the same. The circumstances surrounding where we are born and brought up can be hugely diverse, but to different degrees and in different ways depending on a multiplicity of factors of which nationality might be one. Nevertheless, the seamlessness of the flow means that there is always something there with which we can find threads that will push aside 'us'-'them', racist narratives. And then we find that we can all think and work out in very similar ways.

[54] The grammar of culture: knowledge and practice

My grammar of culture has been with me in various forms since my 1999 small cultures article. I'm still working out how it works and what it can be used for. Then a recent event helped me with this. It is to do with a basic set of knowledge about the intercultural, which parallels C W Mills's notion of the 'sociological imagination' - about who we are in a wider world of political and historical forces.

The grammar provides a map of the varying and opposing forces acting on any intercultural experience. There are essentialist blocks (red) that pull us apart, and non-essentialist threads (blue) that bring us together. This is a dynamic process that I've referred to as small culture formation on the go.



Intercultural experiences are everyday occurrences - whenever we find ourselves in settings that present cultural practices that challenge our thinking-as-usual. This can be from visiting the family next door and going to school for the first time to travelling to distant places.

My example here is having an MRI scan in hospital outpatients. The two health professionals who were doing the scan had to give instructions to me about how and when to breath. They had what I initially perceived to be strong accents that made them difficult to understand, especially against the loud noise of the machine as it moved over me. This perception was partly due to me having already decided, from their appearance, that they were somehow 'foreign'. This was the first block.

Especially because I felt anxious about the scan working and giving results that would help my health condition, I began to panic a bit and allowed myself to be taken in by the 'us'-'them' grand narrative that surrounds me in the media and in the histories of my upbringing - that the health professionals are 'foreign' and 'Other' and have a 'non-native speaker' English that also carries inability in criticality, problem-solving and being able to do the job properly.

The essentialist statements about culture - 'they don't ... don't know how ... can't ...' follow from this - our personal narratives that splinter down from the grand narratives. All the dreadful cultural stereotypes come into play here.

The grammar shows how these blocks circulate and surround, culminating in Centre structures being confirmed - those dominant forces that deny and marginalise who people really are.

The power and easy nature of these blocks are such that I really have to work hard to put them aside and find the threads - to take individual action to combat the Centre structures. This might be harder if I'm a white Western male who feels naturally complacent in a false self-belief that I'm already high on the individualism scale. This arrogant and false self-belief might itself be a driver for these blocks. I therefore need to take deCentred individual action.

Taking action does though also require knowledge. Knowing that all of us have rich personal cultural trajectories that provide a store of intercultural experience that we can bring to any new setting might not be so difficult if we just open our minds. Whenever I suggest to students that we have all in one way or another managed the intercultural when we encountered the family next door, they seem very quickly to see this and can find their own examples, and can relate them to new events.

However, understanding that we all have cultural resources from whatever our cultural upbringing that enable us to understand the workings of society and language wherever we find them might require a more specialist knowledge. To shake myself out of the prejudicial cultural block that makes me suspect the ability of the health professionals largely on the basis of their accent, does I fear require some sociological and linguistic knowledge.

When I think to myself that I need to calm down, it's to enable me to find the space to access this knowledge - that whatever the nature of their English and it's cultural and personal background, this doesn't prevent, and indeed might enhance, perhaps with the experience of further cultural travel, to do a good job. When I manage to to this, then, amazingly, I begin to understand everything that they say.

I might though be wrong in thinking that recognising and putting aside blocks and finding threads requires specialist knowledge. Perhaps we all do have this knowledge from our everyday lives, though not in such technical terms - if we are able not to be tempted by the blocking rumours that always surround us and rely instead on the deeper qualities of human nature.

[\[55\] Borrowing a charger](#)

On the train from London, no-one sitting next to me, I hear a woman in the seat behind asking the young man across the aisle if he has an iPhone charger. He replies

that he doesn't. I take the portable charger out of my bag and turn to speak through the gap between the seats to offer it to her. She gladly accepts and then gives it back to me twenty minutes later, saying that she now has enough charge.

I want to compare this with another incident. Earlier in the afternoon in a café. It was one of those places in London where the majority of customers seem to be students working with their laptops. A woman customer asks a couple at another table if they have a phone charger that they can borrow. They do; and she walks across between the tables and plugs in her phone at the power point on the wall. I think to myself that if she'd asked me I would have declined. I'm a little surprised that she has the boldness to ask and that what seem to be complete strangers offer her their charger.

So what is different between the two cases that makes me prepared to lend my charger to one person but not to the other? Lending it on the train is actually more risky because the person is behind me and out of sight and could easily get off then train without giving it back.

The difference is the language and what it carries with it. What I find myself noticing is that the woman I lent the charger to had what I think is a type of American accent. It indicated a cultural group that I was once familiar with and indeed drawn to, in which I could feel a moral rapport that I could understand and trust.

I'm not American and haven't been there for over ten years, and now can't because the US travel ban prohibits this for someone who's been to Iran within a certain time span. I have nevertheless had contact with this particular cultural group through friends and colleagues. I've also seen it on TV and cinema. At the same time, this is not 'American culture', nor 'American English' as per the common label.

Perhaps it is better to say that it is a particular discourse that I have experienced in the US, but which has travelled far beyond to the extent that I can be more familiar with it than the discourse that I witnessed in the café. Indeed, it may have been that the discourse of that particular person in the café was more 'foreign' to me. It wasn't just her. I also perceived her to be a member of a cultural group that I'd witnessed before - 'people who speak like that'.

This is all about the complex relationship between language and culture - this 'linguaculture'¹³ that flows and travels as we carry it with us - and I would say connect with in complex ways wherever we find it. That it's difficult to put one's finger on exactly what's going on is all the better. It's something to do with small cultures and discourses, and our sometime attachments to them, that can flow in unexpected ways.

¹³ My interpretation of linguaculture is inspired by Karen Risager's 2020 discussion in 'Linguaculture and transnationality', in Jackson, ed, *Routledge handbook of language and intercultural communication*, pp. 115-8.