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Difference and awareness in cultural travel: negotiating blocks and threads

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Abstract: Three university students studying abroad employ a combination of two modes of thinking and talking about cultural difference within a non-essentialist paradigm. At some times they focus on the cultural threads that they bring with them that enable the sharing of cultural experience, the crossing of cultural boundaries and the potential for engaging creatively and critically with new cultural domains. At other times, within a softer non-essentialism, they focus on cultural blocks that, while acknowledging diversity, reinforce the notion of uncrossable cultural boundaries. Both are modes of making sense of and constructing culture; and their mixing demonstrates how we can all employ conflicting discourses of culture at the same time. However, for both cultural travellers and researchers, focusing on cultural threads will be more effective in combating the cultural prejudice and global politics that underpins essentialism. Revealing cultural threads requires a specific methodology in talking to people about culture and recognising the potentials for sharing. This could be a basis for intercultural learning.

Tiga pelajar universiti di luar negara menggunakan gabungan dua cara atau mod berfikir dan berbicara tentang perbezaan budaya menggunakan paradigma 'non-essentialist'. Pada suatu masa, mereka menekankan tentang hubungan antara budaya yang mereka bawa bagi membolehkan mereka berkongsi pengalaman berkaitan budaya, merentasi sempadan budaya dan potensi untuk melibatkan diri dalam persekitaran budaya baru secara kreatif dan kritis. Manakala, pada masa yang lain, dengan menggunakan paradigm 'softer non-essentialism', pelajar-pelajar ini lebih menekankan penggunaan blok budaya atau 'cultural blocks' (budaya saya, budaya anda) di mana disamping mereka mengakui dan menerima kepelbagaian budaya, mereka juga turut mengukuhkan tanggapan berkaitan sempadan budaya yang tidak dapat direntasi. Kedua-dua pemikiran adalah cara yang digunakan untuk memahami serta membina atau menggambarkan budaya; dan penggunaan keduanya menunjukkan bagaimana kita dapat menggunakan wacana budaya yang bercanggah dalam satu masa yang sama. Walaubagaimanapun, kedua-dua pengembara dan penyelidik budaya yang menekankan hubungan antara budaya (cultural threads) akan lebih berkesan dalam membanteras prajudis budaya dan politik global yang menyokong essentialisme. Mendedahkan hubungan kebudayaan memerlukan metodologi yang spesifik dan tertentu untuk berbicara dengan orang lain tentang budaya dan mengenalpasti potensi untuk berkongsi pengalaman satu sama lain. Perkara ini boleh menjadi asas kepada pembelajaran antara budaya.

This paper explores issues of cultural difference within the context of university students as intercultural travellers studying abroad. To do this I will employ a creative nonfictional narrative in which three students share their thoughts about cultural difference and the working concepts of cultural *blocks*, and interweaving cultural *threads*, that represent different modes of expression

within a non-essentialist approach to cultural difference. I will begin by looking at the implications of how paradigm change in intercultural communication studies contributes to the notions of cultural blocks and threads. I will then describe the creative nonfiction methodology and then the perceptions that grow from the creative nonfictional narrative, followed by implications for intercultural awareness and learning.

The broader context of the study is that of interculturality, which I define as the ability to make sense of intercultural experience in terms of one's own cultural background. I also define cultural travellers as people who move between cultural environments. In many ways we are all cultural travellers throughout our lives as we move through a succession of small cultures - family, schools, jobs, friendship groups, relationships and so on. However, students travelling to study in different countries will encounter the more enhanced concepts of 'home' and 'abroad'. But it will be a major theme in this paper, following Holliday (2013), that the small culture travel within the home society is *the* major resource for travel abroad.

Cultural blocks

There has been a significant paradigm shift in the last decade regarding the nature of culture within the field of intercultural communication. This has resulted in an overthrowing of a more established view of the nation state, or national culture as the 'default signifier' of who we are (MacDonald & O'Regan, 2011, p. 553) and 'from overarching templates to engagements with local knowledge and practice' (p. 563). There do however seem to be softer and more radical versions of this movement, which, I will argue, emerge as two very different types of thinking that are characterised by the concepts of cultural blocks and threads respectively.

The softer version of non-essentialism has become the dominant, convenient outcome of the concerted pressure to break from essentialism. Thinking about cultural difference in terms of blocks maintains the notion of national cultures as separate experiences and as the prime units of cultural identity. This conceptualisation nevertheless speaks to non-essentialism by acknowledging huge diversity within these separate cultures that make intercultural similarities and flows possible. This softer version has been problematised elsewhere as neo-essentialist, or perhaps soft essentialism, because the boundaries between national cultures remain uncrossable and confine interculturality to observing and comparing the practices and values of one's own and the other's national cultures, and to finding commonalities to enhance toleration of the other culture (Holliday, 2011, p. 164). The notion of a third space is common here as an intermediary place where the two cultures can meet, but limits us by not allowing us to be totally ourselves in another cultural domain, resulting in some loss of this identity through assimilation with the Other, [page 319 ends here] and inhibiting the possibility that we can 'live in several cultural domains at the same time' (Kumaravadivelu, 2012, p. 5).

There is a postpositivist research approach implicit in the concept of cultural blocks that is relevant not only for academic researchers but also for intercultural travellers who are investigating their surroundings. It is postpositivist in that national cultures are perceived to be real with a content that can be described, albeit with caution, sensitivity and tolerance. This adds to the popularity of soft non-essentialism because it provides a convenient and perhaps reassuring viewpoint that cultural realities are objective, observable and describable - that the map is actually the same as the territory. Talking explicitly about cultural blocks allows researchers and cultural travellers to ask questions and get answers in a literal, factual manner, collecting information about different cultures. This could be something like this:

'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.’ (Holliday, 2015b)

I am not suggesting that the answers received in this type of exchange would necessarily just be taken at face value. We are all, I think, aware of the personal politics behind the way in which we and others talk about personal identities. It is instead the sorts of questions that are asked that indicate some sort of expectation that a certain type of information about culture is both available and likely to be forthcoming - as though this is somehow set aside from the complexity that we see elsewhere in social life. In other words, if politicians or advertisers tell us things about the world we are naturally critical; but when people speak about culture we are somehow less so.

Cultural threads

Talking instead about threads of cultural experience focuses our attention on diverse aspects of our past that mingle with the experiences that we find and the threads of the people that we meet. Cultural threads have the power to extend and carry us across the boundaries that are encouraged by cultural blocks, and beyond the boundaries of the third space. Looking for cultural threads rather than blocks represents the more radical version of non-essentialism. It is less straight forward and perhaps more difficult to conceptualise in that it recognises from the beginning that there are complex shades, layers, personal positioning and contradictions at play when people talk about cultural identity.

Cultural threads can be associated with the connections between the different parts of Holliday’s grammar of culture represented in Figure 1 (adapted from Holliday, 2013, p. 2). They are carried by the personal cultural trajectories (centre left), where we develop different senses of culture as we encounter different small culture environments through changing life events and pull threads of experience out from the cultural resources provided by the particular structures, that form our upbringing (on the left), and are coloured by the global position and politics that these also provide. The underlying universal processes [page 320 ends here] (centre right) process these threads; and it is because these processes are common to all of us that we are able to make sense of each other’s threads, which in turn help us make sense of our own, thus creating a common ground for sharing and enabling interculturality. It is this commonality that provides us with the basis to engage creatively with culture wherever we find it, and with each other, wherever we find ourselves.

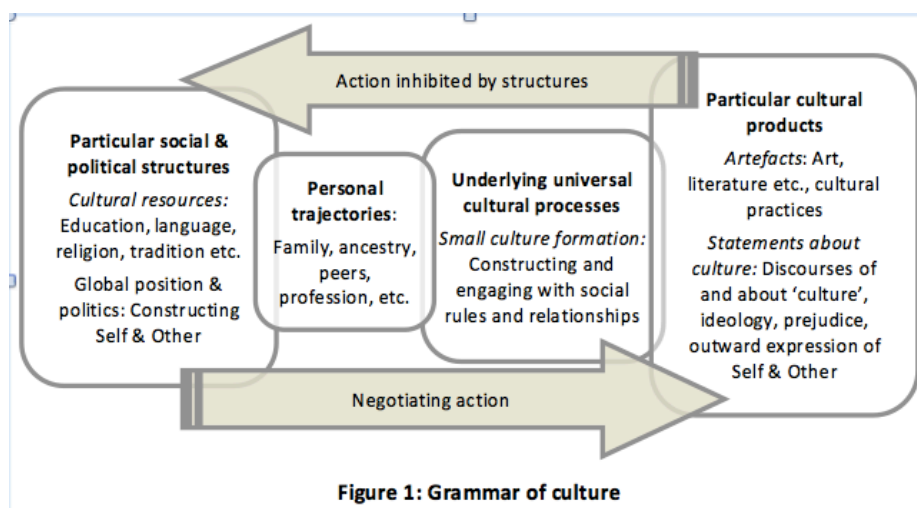


Figure 1: Grammar of culture

The concept of cultural threads also represents the critical cosmopolitan discourse of culture that perceives the boundaries between national cultures to be political and ideological constructions (Delanty, 2012; Delanty, Wodak, & Jones, 2008) and where cultural travellers can be resilient and activist global adventurers (Caruana, 2014). This constructivism recognises that the researcher and participants in interviews co-construct what is being said and that the researcher is therefore

implicated in the subjective power relations of the event (Block, 2000; Miller, 2011). The same would therefore apply to conversations between cultural travellers and others.

It would however be a mistake to suggest that cultural blocks and threads are focused on by different types of people depending on whether they are positivist or constructivist in orientation. In reality individuals can switch from one mode to the other within the same short statement, as observed in interviews with Algerian postgraduate students about their cultural experiences coming to Britain (Holliday 2015a). This fits with examples in Holliday (2013, p. 108) of individuals switching between conflicting discourses of culture - 'West versus the rest', and essentialist culture and language discourses, which, I would argue, the block mode represents, and the critical cosmopolitan discourse, which the thread mode represents. I believe that the cultural block format provides the language that many of us use when we talk about culture.

However, I will argue that cultural threads are actively employed to cross boundaries, while cultural blocks build boundaries and restrict cultural travel. For people who have been used to the cultural block mode as the most conscious, dominant mode of exchanging facts about different 'cultures', shifting to a cultural thread mode might require considerable discipline to think about people as potentially like oneself, with threads to share, [page 321 ends here] rather than as mysterious members of another culture. I can see this struggle in my own recent experience:

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 recent experience with my daughter and grandchildren to talk to him about childcare, how being a parent impacts on his career and so on. (Holliday, 2015)

Of course, in these cases there is interest in cultural differences that flavour the conversations. However, instead of looking for blocks, we follow the threads from who we are as people who have something to share to the implications of our circumstances, how we are brought up, where we live, and then perhaps to comparisons of politics, economy, city life, and so on. And we may in this way begin to see that we can have something to offer, to contribute in the foreign place where we find ourselves, and perhaps find understandings there that we can apply back to where we come from.

In these incidents, the underlying universal cultural processes that we share are fed by personal cultural trajectories (left centre of Figure 1) - my recent history with grandchildren and my daughter managing childcare while working comes into play. The outcome is a conversation made up of a rich intertwining tapestry, with different threads that run between the interactants, some shared, some specific to a particular cultural domain, coming together or pulling apart at different stages of the conversation, with both parties, and perhaps those listening, noticing new threads and pulling in their own to help make sense.

Social action vs. structure

The ability of individuals to be creative in the way in which they construct and manage threads of cultural experience supports the social action theory of society (Weber, 1964) that is implicit in the grammar of culture and that recognises that individuals have the potential to dialogue with social

structure given political circumstances. The concept of small culture formation on the run, or on the go (Holliday, 2013, p. 56) has individuals constructing the manner in which they interact with, make sense of and stay with or leave cultural interactions as they encounter them.

Social action can relate to structures found both at home and abroad. Abroad, it can go beyond the confines of third spaces and cross cultural boundaries. The foreign visitor in the café in Algiers in the above account has the potential to become a regular customer and influence the development of the café as a cosmopolitan site by pulling threads of café-going and other experiences from other cultural domains for others to interact with. At home, there is the important and much discussed question of how far individuals can [page 322 ends here] exercise action in the face of the structures of their own society that can potentially constrain them (Block, 2013).

The arrows at the top and bottom of Figure 1 represent the messy mechanics of the struggle between potential and constraint both at home and abroad; and here the concepts of threads and blocks can also help. The potential to negotiate structures (bottom of the figure) I would argue is largely powered by the creative nature of cultural threads. The opposite, constraining power of structures (top of the figure) I would argue is largely powered by cultural blocks that serve to restrict movement, which are a product of the discourses of and about culture (bottom right) - for example, 'West versus the rest' and essentialist culture and language discourses suggested above. These discourses may in turn be fed by influences from all over the grammar and may work in all directions - in particular the global position and politics that grow out of our social and political structures (left of the figure), the images and values that emanate from cultural artefacts (on the right), and the routines we contribute to in small culture formation.

As these structures work to inhibit social action within our own societies, the structures of the societies that we travel to also inhibit social action as we cross boundaries. These structures are materialised in the prejudices that we meet. The grammar therefore represents actions and the structural inhibitors of those actions both where we come from and everywhere that we might go. It therefore represents an environment of action that travels with us through cultural threads. While the content of the structures may be different in different cultural locations, their form is similar, making it possible for the underlying universal processes to be a shared set of mechanisms for dealing with them. This is why these underlying universal processes will work for us abroad as well as at home if we can recognise the universal form that underpins the different content of the structures that we meet.

A small example of this is provided in Holliday (2013, p. 151). Two shop assistants, who were brought up in a very different cultural domain to the place where they are working, have carried with them the perceived 'foreign' cultural practice of serving more than one customer at once. The practice seems to have great potential in that customers have less time to wait and seem quite happy. After all, practices such as this change and develop all the time, for example the revolutionary introduction of snake queues¹ in banks, airports, large shops and many other places in Britain. However, the shop owner rejects the practice of serving multiple customers because of the principle of individual attention. There could be many interpretations of why the shop owner does this; and she herself may not be aware of the full implications. Furthermore, the example is purposely apparently apolitical and perhaps innocent because I want to look at conflicts that arise in what might seem ordinary everyday events. I want to show that whenever there is any form of conflict there are intersections with ideological aspects of culture. In this example it cannot be denied that the two shop assistants are 'foreign', which in itself will in all cases, I think, invoke global position and politics (bottom left of Figure 1) among the parties concerned. If it were to do with class or ethnicity there would be other types of politics. In this case the shop owner may associate, in cultural block mode, the cultural practice of serving more than one customer at once with a particular national culture that is considered somehow inferior because it has less consideration for the individual. [page 323 ends here]

¹ Snake queues are where customers wait in one snake-like line for the next available turn at a range of counters.

At the same time, the shop assistants are able to read the situation sufficiently to make their decisions about how far it is advisable to oppose their employer. They can do this because they draw cultural threads from similar experience of conflicts with employers, or other positions of authority, where they come from. They are also able to learn the new practice of serving customers individually as a result of the cultural thread of having had to learn practices 'at home' to deal with the structures that they met there.

Creative non-fiction

The second part of this paper will exemplify the discussion so far by means of a creative nonfictional narrative about three university students who come from a different country to the place where they are at university. I follow Agar (1990) in using creative nonfiction to mean a dramatisation of observed behaviour. Composite characters are created with sufficient roundedness and complexity, and with sufficient tension and richness through dramatic devices such as flashbacks, for readers to be able to 'slip into and out of different points of view' (Agar, 1990, pp. 77-78). The reason for employing creative nonfiction is to overcome the difficulty researchers have in capturing what they perceive might be going on in any one selection of data, which can lead to forcing evidence from a small number of verbatim extracts, especially in a short research paper (p. 79). Creative nonfiction may therefore have as much chance as any other form of text creation, where the aim of 'good ethnography' is to demonstrate 'how pattern is grown to enable comprehension of member-produced social action in the context of one world from the perspective of another' (p. 86).

In this sense, the narrative is not data in itself, but the result of analysis of data. Within a constructivist qualitative approach, the data is built from instances rather than samples and therefore cannot claim to be representative of any particular population of students. Its purpose is to illuminate the possibility of what might be going on rather than to establish the fact of what is going on, and in this sense to suggest areas for further investigation (Stenhouse, 1985, p. 31). The narrative is therefore both a thick description in its own right and contributes to a thick description when put together with other studies.

Both writing these narratives and collecting the data from which they are constructed employs the ethnographic disciplines of making the familiar strange, allowing themes and understandings to emerge, and trying to recognise and work around the discourses of culture that prejudice how we see people. The grammar of culture itself has a role to play here, by focusing on the potential of underlying universal processes (centre right Figure 1) that make us all potentially equally culturally proficient. The characters are therefore cautiously constructed around the basic humanistic principle that they are people just like us, who we can all therefore identify with, but who might be brought up in different circumstances with different histories. Not mentioning the characters' countries is a major intervention designed to address both the principle that it is 'wrong both politically and academically' to suggest that what people do is because of their 'ethnic group' and to attempt to put aside national cultural references that carry ideological baggage (Baumann, 1996, p. 1). This way of presenting material also lends itself to revealing multiple threads, made possible by the constructivist approach to the original interviews that search for these threads. The test of validity of the narratives is therefore the degree to which they take on a life of their own both beyond the expectations of the [page 324 ends here] researcher and sufficiently to introduce new domains of understanding. They are designed to invite further enquiry through multiple possible interpretations and mysteries about exactly what is going on, what the characters mean and what they might be thinking between the lines.

Gita, Hande and Francisca

The narrative is taken verbatim from Holliday (2013, pp. 132-134). Because of the multiple possible interpretations of narratives, the discussion that follows goes beyond that presented with this first appearance of the text. There I focus on the cultural prejudice that is caused by the belief that we

are defined by exaggerated images of cultural deficiency. Here I look at what the conversation between the characters tells us about cultural difference with references to conflicting thread and block modes of thinking. While there would be value in presenting the whole of the text first to allow the reader to get fully into it, I have taken the decision to comment on it paragraph by paragraph. It also needs to be remembered that the narrative was not written to be read for its own sake, but for the purpose of research.

The narrative is based on interviews and conversations with students away from home, with long-standing migrant residents, listening to their conversations, and my own experience of different cultural references when residing in different parts of the world. It is written in the cultural thread mode, and yet the friends are seen to be struggling with the cultural block mode of expression. The narrative opens with a conversation between two of the students about home:

Gita and Hande talked about how they missed home. They both agreed that it was hard to find the ingredients they needed to cook the dishes they missed, and that there was just the temptation to rely on fast food and pizzas. They missed their families and the ambiance and the sounds of the streets in the medium-sized towns that they each came from.

The conversation between Gita and Hande begins with very physical aspects of the environments that they come from. It is not clear whether they come from the same place; but they are able to share tangible memories that everyone who has travelled away from home can identify with. They have something in common regarding families they miss, the desire to cook and memories of small towns. We don't need to know which countries or national cultures to understand this. They thus draw threads from their past - personal cultural trajectories that they both recognise and bring them together.

How we wish to be seen

As their conversation continues, and Francisca joins in, there is the beginning of a conflict between cultural blocks, as the students consider events where they can show and exchange the content of their national cultures, and threads of experience where they play with forms that other people might consider not part of their 'cultures':

Francisca asked Gita what she thought of these events which they both knew about where someone would cook their national food and invite friends round to taste it. Gita said it was great in many ways because other people would get some sort of idea where she came from. The problem was that people very quickly jumped to conclusion that this was all [page 325 ends here] that she was. She described an occasion when friends had arrived and shown real surprise that she was playing what one of them referred to as 'Western' music. They very clearly thought that she had somehow learnt to like it since she had been here, good heavens: it was Bob Dylan, someone that her parents had played when she was a young child. Francisca laughed in recognition and asked Gita if she ever consciously exaggerated behaviour which she thought would be the opposite of what people expected, just to get the point across - like the woman they both knew who made a big thing about ordering a glass of wine whenever they were out together because everyone just took it for granted that alcohol was against her religion. Yes, like people thinking that all people from a particular culture had arranged marriages, or had to give all their earnings to the family.

The event referred to here is what many students away from their home country might recognise as 'international events' where there is an invitation to share cultural artefacts - perhaps not only food but also costumes, musical performance and so on. Despite the ostensible inclusivity of such events, they might be considered the epitome of the cultural block mode of thinking. Gita and Hande's anxiety that these events can result in Othering, or reducing individuals to simplified exotic

references, is now well-catalogued in critical sociology, where a number of writers use various phrases to indicate their discomfort - 'the exotica of difference', 'to dress up in some native Jamaican costume and appear the spectacle of multiculturalism' (Hall, 1991, p. 56), "'boutique multiculturalism'" (Kumaravadivelu, 2007, p. 109, citing Stanley Fish), and 'ethnic rites rather than ethnic rights' (p. 111). The terms they use imply a ritual of highly imaged intercultural show that is seductive and perhaps appealing as an initial response for people searching for opportunities to satisfy a feeling of unrecognised identities. An example of this is critiqued in a recent analysis of primary school textbooks in Finland, where 'characters outside Finnish culture, be they animals or humans, are still depicted as some sort of caricatures' (Paavola & Dervin, 2015). The outcome can therefore be a 'liberal' multiculturalism that lacks criticality about the potentially very simplistic images of difference that it can generate. This lack of criticality can also easily fall into the neoliberal trap of an apparent discourse of action that serves only the Western power-base that creates it.

Gita acknowledges the positive side - giving people 'some sort of idea' about where she comes from - but then immediately feels the need to show the other aspects of her identity that go beyond this narrow framing. Here the thread mode of thinking steps in as we see ambivalence between alignment with particular cultural artefacts and the struggle to be seen to have ownership of the artefacts and practices of the world. Whereas the emphasis in intercultural awareness studies has often been on how to understand and adapt to a new national culture, what emerges here is anxiety about being recognised for who one was before arriving, pulling a thread of identity from an earlier time, and how others manipulate this brought identity on arrival. Stuart Hall puts well something about what he wants to be recognised for:

People think of Jamaica as a simple society. In fact, it had the most complicated colour stratification system in the world ... Compared with that, the normal class stratification [in Britain] is absolute child's play. But the word 'Black' was never uttered. (Hall, 1991, p. 53)

While Hall is a well-known sociologist, not everyone who has been where he is and seen what he has might agree with this observation. His observation is nevertheless valid as his own narrative pertaining to his own personal trajectory, pulling a cultural thread from where he comes from to where he is now. **[page 326 ends here]**

This is not, however, a matter of a clear choice between block and thread thinking. Both may serve us at different times depending on our needs. Even though the threads running through our trajectories may or may not, in varying degrees, associate with the ritualised block artefacts of culture that we find ourselves sharing at 'International events', we all have our own takes on these cultural artefacts that others hold up to define us with. At different times and for different reasons we may therefore wish to associate with their block connotations or not. Sometimes we ourselves may hold up the cultural artefacts of food, dress or festivals to say that this is what we are. For this reason, the particular cultural products domain of the grammar (right of Figure 1) also includes statements about culture. 'In my culture this is what we eat and this is how we eat it' therefore becomes a strategic cultural block statement used for particular effect at a particular time depending on the strategy we feel we need to use to project how we want to be seen at a particular time. In this sense, choosing to associate ourselves with cultural blocks is itself one of the threads we pull through our experience. The major point here is that it is not for others to impose these block definitions upon us. We can block define ourselves; but others must not.

This is evident in the narrative, where the friends spend time talking through these choices that they are making in how to present themselves - sharing the threads of how they negotiate the presentation of their identities. As with the case of Stuart Hall above, their decisions about block images are personalised within their individual threads of thought.

How we label others

The difference between blocking ourselves and blocking others, and its political consequences are evident in Gita's reflection on how she herself so easily imposes labels on others as the narrative continues:

This made Gita remember her discussion with Francisca about the people they had seen in the café and how they couldn't stop the standard 'culture' references rising up when they saw people with particular features or styles of clothing. And just she had been about to ask Hande if she felt liberated being away from the pressures of family life.

Indeed, there is evidence here of a personal struggle between the seductive block mode of thinking and emerging threads of critique.

Gita's self-analysis relates to an earlier stage of the same narrative (Holliday, 2013, p. 26). A revealing intercultural awareness task is to reflect on our first unguarded impressions of people we see in cafés, restaurants or public places where there are people from diverse backgrounds. We are all wired to label and Other within the 'standard "culture" references' we have been brought up with and fed by our media and national historical narratives that provide the global position and politics that we bring from our particular national structures (left bottom of Figure 1). Our Othering of people we encounter may not seem to amount to very much; but it is there whenever we are surprised when people from particular backgrounds, which we ascertain from aspects of their appearance, seem competent. There is now considerable awareness of the issues with such responses regarding gender, race and disability. This awareness needs also to be brought to the claim that culture has become a euphemism, or a 'nice' way of talking about race (Delanty et al., 2008; Spears, 1999) and that the Western association [page 327 ends here] with individualism implies cultural superiority (Kubota, 2001; Kumaravadivelu, 2007, p. 15). The case might be made that we do not associate all national cultures with lack of competence, and that some cultures are indeed strongly associated with particular types of competence - 'The Chinese are good at ...'; 'the British are not very good at ... but very good at ...'; 'you would never ask a ... to ...'. The test of this is how it would be felt if such block statements were levelled at a particular race or gender; and I think that the answer would be that they are not appropriate.

Knowing what it's like

In this longer section Hande and Gita continue to share what they miss about home, and move from what are arguably very real aspects of light, sounds, smells, cultural practices that collect around particular locations - their personal threads of cultural experience - to what they are being told about who they are with reference to the cultural block of collectivism:

They went back to things that they missed and talked about how it was very hard for other people who had not been away from home like they were to understand what it was like to wake up imagining for a moment being in one's own country, with familiar smells of breakfast and the smells and sounds, and the colour of the light that one had grown up with. It was so hard not to find the food one was used to. They agreed that they could eventually work out how they were supposed to behave, and that they could even get used to having to try so much harder to make friends.

Back to family life again, they began to talk about issues that they found in common - concerning boyfriends, family pressures for them to get married and so on; and there was a huge amount they had in common. They talked about this and decided that it was because these were fairly universal things - except perhaps for Western people. So what was the issue there? Was it in fact the case that the West *was* completely different to everywhere else? *Was* it after all the case that the world really was divided into individualist and collectivist cultures?

Hande said that she had heard on several occasions people from the East and the

South, when they met each other, even for a short period of time, say that 'you are like us'; and it had something to do with shared understandings about the nature of life, or something like that. Gita asked Hande if she thought it was to do with things like family loyalties and the issues that arose from that. Hande said she wasn't sure. Gita said she thought it might have something to do with a warmth that arose from all sorts of things that people had to deal with which meant they had to depend on each other more. Then she thought again and said that it might not be that at all, because she had heard Westerners talking about dealing with all those things. The problem was that Westerners didn't *think* that foreigners could be like them, perhaps because of all this stuff about food and festivals, and being traditional and religious; and so they just kept their distance.

Hande and Gita weigh the evidence carefully regarding whether or not they belong to a cultural block that is different to that of the West. The outcome of their analysis is that, even though there are common experiences, a separate, collectivist, family-oriented East and South could be more a Western imagination than an actuality.

This conclusion is of course theoretical but does resonate with the argument that the concept of collectivist cultures is a Western construction designed to characterise the non-West as deficient (e.g. Kim, 2005, p. 108; Moon, 2008, p. 16) within a larger politics of a Centre power defining the Periphery to suit its own markets (e.g. Bhabha, 1994; Hall, [page 328 ends here] 1996; Said, 1978). The important point here is that this is the sense that the three students are making of the suggestion of cultural blocks when set against their personal threads of cultural experience.

Part of this sense making leads Gita to think more about her conversations with their purportedly Western friend, Francisca. Their exploratory sharing of cultural experience takes her again into the thread mode:

Gita then thought about Francisca again. It could be argued that she was Western, though it was sometimes hard to work out who was and who wasn't. They talked a lot about cultural things and also seemed to share a lot of feelings about them. They talked about language a lot - about how in a new language it just wasn't possible to say certain things and that it could actually begin to change the way you thought. Gita always maintained that this was part of the bigger issues - back to food and smells again. She had once talked about sitting on her balcony to someone and been misunderstood. The other person thought she meant she had a private box at the theatre. Then she realised that no-one here *had* balconies at home - and that this cut out an entire human experience, a sensuality to do with inside-outside, the possibility of sleeping there, how people thought about bedrooms, beds, neighbours, privacy, sharing and so on.

Then Francisca had told her that when she was a student she had lived in a small apartment without any chairs, just cushions and rugs; and she had decided that even these differences were not final. It wasn't because her 'West' was at the borders with the East - they had talked and laughed about this a lot - because the other students had been very 'Northern'.

It seems that Francisca actually helps Gita to sort out her threads that help understand why the blocks are presented. Gita is taken back to the harder block references of food and festivals; but the reference to balconies takes her forward again to cultural experience threads that relate to geographical physicalities. The punch-line is Francisca's account of her student accommodation that shows another thread of cultural physicality that suddenly, and not absolutely clear why, brings both Gita and Francisca into a common thread of shared understanding.

Conclusion: intercultural learning

The discussion in this paper has suggested that while cultural difference is a crucial phenomenon that derives from the social structures within which we are brought up, we have the potential through cultural travel to cross boundaries and find ourselves in new domains and at the same time engage positively, creatively and critically with the realities and the people that we find. These principles of interculturality are enhanced by a cultural thread mode of thinking and talking about cultural difference. However, it also emerges that special strategies are required to ensure that the thread mode takes place. This is especially the case because the competing block mode seems to come to us more naturally.

Therefore, if there is to be such a thing as intercultural training it should be in how to focus on cultural threads and put aside cultural blocks - how to ask the questions, to talk to people, to recognise the threads in one's personal cultural trajectory, to connect this to the threads of others, to find threads that one can relate to. An example of this, although the terms are not used, is the IEREST activity for Erasmus students in which they are encouraged to find their own resonances in Nigerian writer, Adichie's account of the roots of cultural Othering (IEREST, 2015, pp. 41-44), and in recognising the blocks that occur [page 329 ends here] through statements about culture (p.45). A mirror of this is the training of intercultural researchers - in the basic ethnographic disciplines of qualitative enquiry. Researchers too need to learn how to contribute their own cultural threads in conversational interventions within interviews to bring out the threads of their participants. Such training could include a close analysis of conversations - an ethnomethodology of how thread conversations come about.

Then, to reiterate the value of struggling to acquire thread talking and thinking about cultural difference - it is about finding common ground in such a way that we can move forward in taking interest in other people so that they may also take interest in us - not as an exotic foreign Other that pulls the strings of prejudice and a global politics of inequality. [page 330 ends here]

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