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Who We Really are as Resourceful and Creative Cultural and Linguistic Travellers: Combatting Divisive, Blocking Narratives and Finding Threads that Connect Us

Abstract: A postmodern approach recognises the ideological and therefore distorting, prejudicial and divisive nature of large, national and civilisational culture definitions. It is therefore necessary to find ways, in everyday and professional life, to put these definitions aside and therefore dissolve them. To do this, choices need to be made to find ways of bypassing the 'us'-'them' blocking narratives that are produced by these definitions that we have been brought up with and which easily surround us. We need to search for more personal thread narratives that find hybrid identities that we share and which bring us together. These choices arise in the everyday process of small culture formation on the go in which we pass by and make sense of each other. The grammar of culture lays out the various forces that inhabit these blocking and alternative thread narratives.

Key words: culture, narratives, ideology, social construction, hybridity

This paper follows what I consider to be a postmodern position, that what have been commonly been thought of as separate, large, national or civilisational 'cultures' are ideologically constructed and indeed neo-racist in their false reduction of the people 'within them' to behaviour-governing, essentialist stereotypes (Anderson, 2006; Dervin, 2011; Hervik, 2013; Holliday, 2011; Mannheim, 1936). I also take a critical cosmopolitan approach, influenced by postcolonial sociology, which accuses Western grand narratives of marginalising non-Western cultural realities (Delanty, 2006; Hall, 1996).

This does not however mean that there is no cultural difference. Hugely diverse cultural practices (e.g. protocols, systems, clothing, food and ceremonies) and sensual and physical features (e.g. sounds, colours, smells, architectures, cityscapes, landscapes and climates) flow in complex ways across and within cultural environments, but without clear boundaries. While we are all different in the ways that we are brought up in our respective societies, when, in everyday small culture formation on the go, we experience more unfamiliar cultural settings, we can find resonances with what we know because we have been learning, negotiating, passing by, observing, disagreeing with, constructing and taking part in cultural practices, and appreciating the value and nostalgia of appearances all our lives. Shared underlying universal cultural processes mean that wherever we go, while the content might be strange, these processes are accessible and learnable. We are already used to variations in these practices as we move through multiple social settings, from the family next door to new schools, jobs and institutions throughout our lives (Lankshear et al., 1997). In this sense, we are all hybrid. This does not imply, as has sometimes been argued in the more essentialist sense, an imperfect, in-between state. Instead, we

are all normally, complex and many-facetted; and understanding this is a defence against the Centre structures (e.g. hierarchies, patriarchy, colonialism) that try to define us as less or different than what we might be (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1996).

The opposition between who we are and structures is complex. On the one hand, the structures with which we are brought up in our respective societies and their cultural products, through education, media, the arts, and language, can provide us with rich resources to appreciate the diversities that we meet. Nevertheless, they can also provide us with grand narratives, big stories, that set us against the cultural Other – 'us'–'them' idealisations of 'our' nation, people, language, values, religion and so on, often referring back to iconic heroes and battles.

I will illustrate these points with a series of instances (originally in the form of either reconstructed ethnographic narratives or interviews) from various of my publications, which will be specified at the point of reference. In my analysis here I use the concepts of *blocks*, large-culture, Centre definitions of difference that pull us apart, and small-culture, deCentred *threads* that bring us together and represent the commonalities that we need to work hard to find (Holliday, & Amadasi, 2020).

'Betrayal' in a foreign university

The first instance concerns Wang, who is working abroad in a university quality office (Holliday et al., 2016, pp. 52–53). Her funding to attend a staff development event is cancelled by her head of department whom she had considered a 'friend'. She explains this as her large-culture 'collectivist' concept of friendship that cannot be found in this 'individualist' large-culture. This block narrative immediately implies an uncrossable barrier. However, other events change Wang's mind. She and two colleagues help

the sociology department to develop their quality systems and discover that they have a very different 'small' culture to their own department in the same university: they do not understand their system of administration, they have meetings which are impossible to understand with people coming late, despite this large culture's reputation for punctuality. Wang finds a thread narrative in her colleagues who 'come from there' agreeing with this perception of strangeness. Another thread that then emerges is that several colleagues 'from there' have also been denied travel funding just like her. Wang therefore appreciates that universities there are just as complex and inefficient as at home. She also feels more culturally competent because she has international experience which enables her to place what she finds there in the broader perspective of universities she has studied in at home. Wang also feels that this perspective has given her more cosmopolitan negotiation and organisation skills with which she sometimes influences her colleagues. She also feels that intercultural travel has made her particularly good at watching and working things out, being sincere, sensitive and efficient. This *observation* has encouraged me to consider more the importance of recognising the value of the cultural life experience that we bring with us (Amadasi, & Holliday, 2018), especially in professional circumstances (Holliday, 2012).

Another thread narrative is that large culture theories of difference are themselves a way of coping that we can all relate to. In this sense, claiming incompatible large-culture difference is a positioning projection of desperation that can be a response to culture shock rather than a true representation.

It is the detail of what is going on between people in particular instances of small culture formation on the go that enables Wang to find a thread about institutional life that cuts across and indeed dissolves imagined large-culture borders. However, it could easily have been the case that no amount of such direct experience would enable her to

sidestep imagined large-culture explanations. There need therefore to be disciplines of looking that will stave off such easy answers. My grammar of culture (Holliday, 2018b), inspired by the social action theory of Max Weber (1922/1964), lays the ground by purposefully presenting sufficient looseness and complexity to prevent simplistic large-culture analysis and opens an important window on underlying universal cultural processes and personal cultural trajectories from which thread narratives are likely to emerge. The postmodern appreciation of the nature of social construction (Berger, & Luckmann, 1979) further supports an ethnographic and phenomenological discipline of problematising established large-culture explanations (Baumann, 1996; Schutz, 1964).

Exploring study abroad experience

Hande and Gita are studying abroad (Holliday, 2018b, pp. 54–55). They come from different cultural backgrounds and share the thread narrative of missing home in the aesthetic sense – cooking ingredients and the ambiance and the sounds of the streets. They also encounter block responses from the people they meet who frame them as 'non-Western' and are then surprised when they play 'Western' music. However, as they continue to interrogate the architecture of how they are wrongly perceived by others, they begin to appreciate how they too fall into the trap of creating Othering block narratives about people with particular features and clothing to common large-culture stereotypes. Here they found the seduction of what appeared to be threads, as they share how they stereotyped minority groups in their own countries, but then realised that these were threading blocks based in ancient traditions of prejudice; and they realised that the danger and intensity of this was serious.

They also note a particular type of blocking narrative against them that comes from people they meet there who frame themselves

as 'Western'. Even though Hande and Gita see that they also have family loyalties and depend on each other just like they do, these people just fail to imagine that 'foreigners' can be anything like them. When they see Hande and Gita being critical or independently minded, it is assumed that they have learnt it as a result of integrating and studying there, in the 'West'.

This blocking narrative belongs to a widespread West as steward discourse. Initially deceptive in its apparent well-wishing, the 'stewardship' element is deeply patronising. Another student abroad, Jenna, confronts this (Holliday, 2018b, pp. 86–87) when her friend, Bekka, who identifies herself as 'Western', seems surprised when she is punctual for lectures and asks critical questions. The well-wishing part comes out when Bekka congratulates her – 'you are doing so well'. But then the patronising part is when this is a framed as 'you are now becoming like us' and 'Westernised' as though Jenna can have brought nothing of value with her. When she points out to Bekka that people at home, just like there, are sometimes punctual and sometimes not depending on the circumstances, Bekka seems annoyed and explains that it is only in 'individualist cultures' like hers that people are free to make personal decisions about being punctual or not, and that in 'collectivist cultures' like Jenna's, people do not have this choice unless they are 'Westernised'.

'I have my own culture. I don't need yours.'

On another occasion, a student abroad (S) reports a conflict over accommodation (Amadasi, & Holliday, 2018). Because she is breaking her contract, S is told by her landlady that she can never be 'part of this culture'. S responds by asserting that she does not need to be 'part of this culture' because she 'has her own'. One possible, block interpretation of

S's response as that she does not want to integrate with what she considers to be the incompatible large-culture of her country of study. However, it becomes evident that she is instead resisting what she considers to be racist abuse from her landlady by saying that her main resource is the cultural experience that she brings with her. This is a thread narrative that recognises the resonance between her personal cultural trajectory and what she finds in this new cultural environment. She explains that of course she is aware that she is breaking her accommodation contract, as they have similar rules in her own country, but that this does not justify the abuse that she receives. Her problem is not cultural but with lacking information about her legal rights in the face of the abuse, which she would know in her own country.

An important point to note here is the role of we two researchers in this process of understanding. As stated above, we need to be methodologically open to intercultural threads, and to be proactive in helping the people we interview to stave off blocks. This does not mean that we are trying to impose our bias, but that we are not prepared to take what might appear to be blocks at face value. The example of S arises from an interview that I carried out with my colleague, Sara. The thread interpretation only came about because Sara suspected and encouraged it by sharing her own experience of dealing with accommodation problems while studying abroad.

Englishes and labelling

Reference to linguistic travel comes late in this discussion because the postmodern viewpoint does not recognise the common assumption that national language is mapped precisely with national culture (Saraceni, 2015). The more hybrid relationship in which language can attach itself to any cultural reality became evident in my own experience of interviewing

S with Sara. They each brought their own linguacultures from their other languages (Risager, 2011) into the English of the interview. Also, being critical of what I consider to be the neo-racist, native-speakerist block presumption that the ideologically constructed 'native speaker' possesses an exclusively superior command and monopoly of the language (Holliday, 2018a), I was open to appreciating a different sort of linguistic thread with them as I had to submit to their very competent but sometimes unfamiliar use of English. Rather than being a block in communication, this increased my cautious making the familiar strange that helped me to search out deCentred threads. Resonating with the point made above that blocks are easy answers, it might be the 'easy English' which is often associated with the so-labelled 'native speaker' ideal that acts against the disciplined thinking that threads require.

What we can learn

These instances have shown that cultural and linguistic diversity and indeed hybridity is the norm. People everywhere are struggling to make sense during the everyday process of small culture formation on the go. However, there are serious choices to be made in social action and research – whether or not to look further for deeper thread meanings that do not confine us within reductive, prejudiced large-culture blocks.

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