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Working with ChatGPT: Engaging with the Real World and Our Own Academic Practice

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Abstract: When using ChatGPT to write an ethnographic description of an intercultural event or to make a picture of a distant location, it by default employs the dominant discourse in intercultural communication of positivist, exoticist, Orientalist Othering. It also consciously uses modes of description which give the false impression that it has direct experience of social settings. However, when it is challenged, it displays impressively critical understanding of the ‘epistemic danger’ of such representations and why they are employed. This paper argues that this is therefore an example of AI representing the discursive and ideological struggles which are already present in the academic field of intercultural communication and perhaps in qualitative social science more generally—where a dominant naïve positivism, encouraged by our neoliberal institutions, similarly, by default, takes us away from engaging directly with the social world we seek to investigate. We can also be reminded by this engagement with AI what it takes to deCentre how we engage with such realities—to apply a phenomenological interrogation of how we represent them. This is by no means a new task. AI simply provides a rapid example of its intense importance.

Key words: AI, ethnography, intercultural, representation, Orientalism, deCentring

Introduction

In this essay I am going to look at how working with AI, and in particular the free version of ChatGPT, both endangers, and also unexpectedly helps us understand more about, engaging with the real world. I will focus on ethnographic description related to the intercultural because this is where I have recently encountered the use of ChatGPT in my own trajectory. However, I feel that this relates across qualitative social science research and perhaps more generally. I will argue that ChatGPT’s inability to engage with direct experience of social life while appearing to do so actually reflects what happens when we do not use AI—where we allow dominant discourses and naïve positivist methods also to take us away from direct experience of what happens around us.

As an ongoing and developing process of sense-making, I will begin by reflecting further on my recent article and blog (Holliday, 2025, 2026a), and then on a further ‘interview’ with ChatGPT. Interrogating what it can and cannot do will take me to broader reflections on research practice and personal engagement. I will conclude with tentative suggestions regarding how we can use AI as a personal research companion which, as well as assisting can help us interrogate our thinking and practice. I find helpful here Dervin’s (2026) assertion that the difficulties we have with AI reflect those that we already have in sorting out competing meanings and paradigms in our own academic work—and that understanding its weaknesses helps us learn about our own.

Methodology

I am employing an autoethnographic approach which entails the ethnographic disciplines of making the familiar strange and allowing the unexpected to emerge. The accompanying recognition of the intersubjective implicatedness of the researcher (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Holliday & MacDonald, 2020) and the need for their phenomenological self-awareness (Luckmann, 1978) is of particular importance where the use of AI has an impact on how we perceive our own research practice and how it relates to the real world. The questions which I ask ChatGPT are therefore informed by this implicatedness. I shall argue that, while it is not able to respond as an entity with its own real-life experience, how it responds is intertwined with what it is asked.

It is this interrogation of my researcher thinking that necessitates revisiting my previous publication and blog where I engaged in a reflexive conversation with iChatGPT. This acknowledges that what the researcher asks is indeed part of the data, as I have demonstrated in earlier interview studies (Amadasi & Holliday, 2018; Holliday, 2012), following other discussions on the intersubjectivity of the interview (e.g. Merrill & West, 2009; Talmy, 2011). In the final part of the essay, where I refer to the interview with ChatGPT carried out for the purpose of this study, I therefore indicate some of the specific questions I asked to get the responses that I did. (This can only be partial due to the limitations of space.)

As a technical note, throughout I am using the free version of ChatGPT, with no enhanced settings, simply because this is what I have had access to.

Beginning

An early and revealing experience of using ChatGPT was asking it to write a poem about a cup of coffee on the table in front of me in the style of English Romantic poet William Wordsworth (Holliday, 2026a, p. 11). I was curious to see what it could do; and it managed the task in seconds. Without me having huge literacy in what makes a good poem, I could see that what it produced seemed competent. I did not expect it to be any more than an imitation of Wordsworth based on lots of poems it could find on the internet. Immediately evident and useful is ChatGPT's tireless and instant ability to process any data it can find on the internet or documentary and visual material it is presented with in response to queries. However, the user of AI, very crucially, needs to already possess the necessary knowledge to assess what it provides.

It is the cruciality of this user-knowledge that I wish to explore. AI generally and ChatGPT particularly can give a false impression of what sort of knowledge *they* possess. Without getting into a deep discussion about epistemology and ontology, I will argue that exploring this relationship also reveals something about how we as researchers and academic writers work out what we know and need to know about what we are investigating.

Admitting misrepresentation

Regarding the poem about the cup of coffee, there was a subtle and powerful seduction at play—giving the impression of knowledge that did not in fact exist. While it appeared to be responding to the physicality of the cup on the table, ChatGPT was instead relying on what other poems it had read about cups of coffee or similar things. It could not see or touch the cup of coffee on the table or have lived experience of such or related phenomena which a poet might

bring to the task. It was relying on rumours rather than direct experience of the physical and social world. As Konik (2025, p. 140) notes, when AI created an impressive Rembrandt-style painting based in 346 authentic examples, 'it merely recombined existing data—akin to a forger "capturing the spirit" of an artist's work without contributing genuine innovation or intent'.

To explore further the implications of this lack of direct experience, I asked ChatGPT to create a picture of a village with a mosque in a valley (Holliday, 2025). I chose this as a test because I already have a photograph of such a scene. While I have never been there and it is taken from a book (Beny & Nasr, 1975, pp. 184–185), it relates to places that I *have* been to. Also, in a previous chat, of which this new one would have no memory, when I uploaded the picture, it had accurately located it as in the Mahan valley in Iran. I wanted to see if it would be tempted to follow the new genre of over-coloured and exaggerated AI-generated images of so-imagined 'geographically and historically distant' places one now sees on social media.

The image that it instantly produced was very obviously of that genre. When I questioned why it had done this, it immediately responded that I was 'right to do so'. I was impressed by the critical language which it used in admitting that the image was 'adhering to the AI agenda' to 'flatten reality into a cliché' and 'reinforce exoticism' by means of 'a subtle form of othering that freezes places outside the West in an eternal postcard state'. It also said that this was 'epistemically dangerous'.

When I questioned why it therefore followed this agenda, it responded:

: 'Even though I know the limitations, because the system prioritises
 : *usefulness and accessibility* over epistemic caution ... misrepresentation-
 : -by-simplification isn't currently treated as a hard safety boundary. That
 : said, ... the system should probably surface epistemic warnings more often,
 : not just produce outputs Right now, my default behaviour is: Comply first,
 : Explain later if challenged'. (Holliday, 2025, citing ChatGPT, its emphasis)

'If challenged' is the key phrase here; and the nature of my challenge, which brought out this critique, depended on the particular knowledge that I possess

of where the real and distorted images originate. It is also significant that what it terms 'epistemic danger' is not considered to be a 'hard safety' concern. At the same time, 'when challenged', ChatGPT can actually help with providing useful phrases. Hence, I will continue to use its phraseology here.

'Epistemic danger'

In the field of intercultural studies, the 'danger' that has been recently been associated with AI is that it communicates Western-centric cultural bias (e.g. O'Regan & Ferri, 2025). What I get from the village-and-mosque photograph test is that this might be not only about content, but also mode of representation. Indeed, in this experiment, I had provided the content. But I had done this with knowledge that the idea of a village with a mosque, from a 'Western-centric' viewpoint, was likely to attract 'dangerous' exoticist imagery. This is very much part of my knowledge in that I have long insider experience of how the 'Western' mind commits such exoticist distortion (Holliday, 2022a).

I already had experience of this when I asked ChatGPT to write an ethnographic description of an interaction between a British male doctor and an Iranian woman patient with a persistent cough. This was part of an autoethnographic study resulting from the experience of supervising a medical student (Holliday, 2026a). Again, ChatGPT provided the description based not on direct experience but on a synthesis of all the academic studies of what it considered related that it could find. It described the patient's response to the doctor's questions about her illness as follows:

: 'There was a flicker of unease. In Iran, she might have been offered tea
 : and gentle small talk before discussing her health. Here, the directness of
 : the questions how often, how severe, what colour the mucus felt clinical
 : and impersonal'. (2026a, pp. 14, citing ChatGPT)

I felt that the reference to expecting tea and small talk indicated the false Western imagination of someone from an Eastern collectivist, high-context

culture which discourages 'directness' (Hall, 1976; Triandis, 1995), in turn based on the Orientalist imagination of indolence (Said, 2003). I had had asked ChatGPT to make the patient an Iranian woman because of my personal experience of Iran and of Iranian women studies (e.g. Honarbin-Holliday, 2009), and with a cough because I had been to a doctor in Iran with this illness. I had never experienced Iranian women or doctors not being 'direct'.

Again, when I asked ChatGPT why it had produced this imagery, it quickly responded, this time with another alternative and critically competent analysis, that the patient's behaviour could have multiple explanations while the open that it chose was Orientalist:

‘Yes, aspects of the report can reflect an orientalist framing—specifically, the ... binary between “Western autonomy” and “non-Western passivity”. ... In reality, her response could stem from a mix of factors: language barriers or unfamiliarity with UK healthcare norms (which many UK-born patients also struggle with), personal temperament or anxiety, Gender dynamics, a sense of being out of place in a new country’. (Holliday, 2026a, p. 16, citing ChatGPT)

I was also concerned about the phrase, ‘flicker of unease’, which I felt was too sensationalist for an ethnographic description. I have associated this more emotive style with the ‘evocative mode’ where the ethnographer attempts a cultural immersion (Atkinson, 2006). Once again, when I asked about this, ChatGPT was quick to show that it knew about this:

‘The evocative mode ... creates an immediate, immersive experience for the reader, making cultural encounters more tangible and relatable. Since I don't have direct observational data, evocative writing allows me to construct a plausible, human-centred narrative that reflects broader cultural dynamics. It also aligns with the way many ethnographies today engage readers, especially in applied or public anthropology’. (Holliday, 2026a, pp. 13, citing ChatGPT)

The point which I begin to see here is that it is not so much the nature of the description *per se* which ChatGPT provides, but its admitting that it uses

this evocative mode to cover for its lack of direct experience of the events described—to give the effectively false impression that it was there, directly observing the event, when it was not. This is the problem with imitating what others have said—fabricating a sense of reality which actually does not exist. When pushed further, ChatGPT explained how it:

‘relied on a familiar, pre-shaped narrative ... common in ethnographic writing and medical humanities, [which] often reflects inherited academic tropes more than actual critical engagement. In reproducing it, I mirrored a normalised way of storytelling that’s frequently unexamined ... These templates ... are embedded in how culture, migration, and healthcare are often discussed in the literature I’ve been trained on. They’re pervasive’. (Holliday, 2026a, pp. 17–18, citing ChatGPT)

This reference to a ‘pre-shaped narrative’ in ‘a normalised way of storytelling’ then draws my attention to how ChatGPT is not only imitating the content but also employing an established form of academic representation which affects how we all deal with direct experience. Indeed, even if I knew that the doctor-patient description was written by a researcher who *had* been there, I would still be questioning the ‘normalised’ mode of representation which was tempting them away from what might actually be going on—in this case giving further credence to a false Orientalist cultural trope by means of a sensationalist phrase. ‘What is actually going on’ is of course also a deeply complex issue. This is where, for me, an ‘analytical approach’, as an alternative to the evocative mode, has seemed more successful because, it separates the ethnographic text as data from the authorial commentary that then reflects back on it (Anderson, 2006). This reflexive separation allows a clearly demarcated phenomenological questioning of how reality is being represented as a result of the ideological positioning of the researcher (Luckmann, 1978).

Direct experience and deCentred ‘truth’

In trying further to untangle this very tricky relationship between direct experience, dominant modes of presentation, and indeed the ‘truth’, I am helped by Lehman and Canagarajah’s (2024) description of the importance of carrying out research connected with one’s personal and community-based experience. This is in opposition to the Centre-Western academy’s apparent desire for ‘rational control and dispassionate inquiry in order to find objective answers’ which suppresses ‘experiences such as suffering, pain, difficulties, and limitations in human inquiry’ (2024, p. 14). I do not however think that this is the sensationally imagined ‘suffering and pain’ in the doctor-patient description which does not acknowledge researcher limitations. It is also not the routinised, token writing of ‘limitations’ sections at the end of positivist research papers and dissertations.

A more authentic engagement is very evident in Canagarajah’s work elsewhere (2022), where he builds directly on his personal multilingual history within a context of colonisation, and in his hugely influential (1993) description of the culturally-rich sense-making that Tamil high-school students scribble in the margins of their English-language textbooks in private sites of learning out of sight of their teachers. This ‘personal and community-based experience’ for me resonates with Stuart Hall’s (1991) suggestion that beginning with the small is the best way to side-step Centre structures and builds on the everyday.

Indeed, recent research that has advanced thinking about intercultural communication has been of this nature. This includes making sense of the everyday and impromptu direct experience of the materiality of the intercultural (Badwan & Hall, 2020; Fay & Huang, 2025; Ros i Solé, 2024), of the bureaucratisation of intercultural communication education in the university (Collins, 2018), and of the Othering of so-labelled ‘international’ university students and staff (Kebabi, 2024; Merabet, 2025), and finding creative methodologies to research such personal experience (Souleh, 2023). The dialogue that this can set up with noticing the unexpected about the everyday is evidenced by my recent experience of a research student’s (Liu, 2026) seminar presentation. She reported how smelling freshly-baked seasonal confectionary in a shop in Britain

helped her understand more about a school-child making a festival dumpling in China. This in turn led me to recall a barista making matcha in a British café and connect it with how inherited material culture can connect across constructed cultural boundaries (Holliday, 2026b).

All of this direct-experience research required moving away from the naïve positivism which Lehman and Canagarajah (2024) problematise. This awareness of widely divergent discourses of what might be considered 'truth' is by no means new. We learn about them, interact with them and make personal decisions through education, reading, but also mediated by direct experience of life. I have had impromptu and informal conversations with British university students who tell me about how they are struggling with these very issues, but perhaps under different names. That I was involved in this struggle as an undergraduate student at the end of the 1960s is evidenced in the pencilled underlings and margin comments, that I still have, which I made on the pages of primary texts in social theory. Hence, against an underlined phrase in Karl Popper's (1945, p. 98) discussion of Plato's (positivist?) concept of justice, I have scribbled a personal reference to Gerard Manley Hopkins whose poetry we studied in the final year of secondary school, which in turn resonated with my everyday experience of the complexities of nature. In other places I made references to other social theory that I had read and made my own sense of through direct experience of social life.

One could say that we now live in a very different world where there is a massive increase in quantity, intensity and rapidly space-filling persuasiveness of information. However, in the 1960s and early 70s, when I was a teenager and young adult, there were also hugely conflicting, though less exhausting, ideological messages that made it necessary to try to discern deCentred 'truth' from Centre 'distortion'. My undergraduate reading of social theory (Kuhn, 1970; Mills, 1970/1959; Weber, 1964/1922) distinguished between and warned against naïve positivism, bureaucracy and Centre structures, supported by personal reading of Kafka, Huxley and Orwell, plus Buddhist and Taoist thought. While this may look like a privileged academic trajectory, my thoughtful scribbles never translated into more than very average grades. I was just one of those students making sense of the world.

The need for deCentring

This referencing to reading and other theory also indicates that we are not alone when we engage with direct experience. Indeed, E.M. Forster notes the danger of first-hand observation without considering what others have said (1909, p. 93). This of course depends on who the others who have spoken about this experience are. Leaving behind naïve positivism means that we need to work much harder to sort out the validity of what we are thinking and saying about what we are directly engaging with. Geertz (1993/1973, pp. 7, 14) refers to this as ‘sort[ing] winks from twitches and real winks from mimicked ones’ in the richness of particular cultural settings where the complexities of social life need to be ‘thickly-described’. To do this we have to be *there* to see the detail of what is or might be going on. To discern where we stand with what others are saying about it also requires that we are *there* to see for ourselves precisely what they are talking about.

Returning to my concern with ChatGPT’s use of sensationalist description, this is actually far more complex than whether an evocative or analytical style of ethnography is used. There may be a very good reason for a researcher to use a particular phrase, such as ‘flicker of unease’ in the doctor-patient description. But this must not be just to ‘make it sound more convincing’—made up to make it *seem* that you were there when in fact you were not. Thus, Gasiorowska (2026), in describing her personal struggle to work out her research methodology, states that ‘every auto-ethnographic story carries emotions, and that discipline is applied to the process of their analysis and interpretation’.

There therefore needs to be a sufficiently detailed account of this struggle to decide what and what not to say and claim. This is something that I feel we do not see enough of in research writing. Simply saying that this is what we saw or heard and that this is evidence of whatever, we may as well have used AI because there is no real interrogation of *being there*. We therefore, instead, need to apply a phenomenological ‘inspection of our own experiences’ by means of a ‘step by step’ scrutiny of ‘the historically, biographically, socially and culturally concrete features of everyday experience to its elementary structures’ (Luckmann, 1978, p. 8).

A further consideration here is the possible hidden nature of the various dominant and competing discourses of the intercultural. Despite its stated awareness when asked, ChatGPT will not have set out to purposefully Other the Iranian woman patient or the civilisational underpinning of the village with the mosque in the valley. This reminds us that we can all easily employ such discourses in the everyday interpersonal positioning of what I have termed small culture formation on the go, in which we are influenced in all directions by essentialist 'us'-'them' grand and personal narratives that create blocks to understanding each other (Holliday, 2022b).

Conversely, we need to understand that any representation provided by AI is not authored by us, and therefore is not responsible as we need to be for its discursal and ideological positionality. Where it will seem to take the Centre route unless asked otherwise, it is we, the user, who must take responsibility to deCentre in our reading, use or analysis of whatever it provides for us.

The danger of easy seductive detail

This discussion so far enables me to assess some suggestion that AI might be used in intercultural training programmes as a neutral interlocutor (Dai et al., 2025). With this in mind, I asked ChatGPT to 'write an ethnographic description of an intercultural encounter in a British university'.

This was a different chat to the ones referred to above and therefore had no memory of them. Nevertheless, it begins with the same type of evocative, sensationalist detail as in the doctor-patient description, cited above, of 'a rainy' afternoon' and a café 'filled with the smell of coffee'—to give the false sense that it was actually there. In the following I have extracted about a quarter of the total description which seems to relate to cultural difference, and put in bold the particular phrases which seem to do this. What I have left out is what seemed to me arbitrary padding—given that ChatGPT was not actually there to notice this as actual detail.

At a small round table near the window sat three students: James, a British undergraduate from Manchester; Mei, an international student from China; and Ahmed, a postgraduate student from Egypt.

The three students worked on a group assignment for their sociology seminar. **James appeared relaxed**, leaning back in his chair with his laptop open. **Mei sat upright, quietly** reviewing notes on her tablet. **Ahmed alternated between looking at both students** while occasionally jotting down ideas in a notebook. ...

A subtle cultural difference emerged when **James jokingly criticised** the complexity of the assignment. ... **Mei smiled politely but did not respond immediately.** ... What James intended as a light joke had momentarily created uncertainty for her ...

Another intercultural moment occurred when **Ahmed suggested dividing the tasks** among group members. **Mei agreed quickly** and proposed writing a detailed outline before the next meeting. **James ...** said he normally **preferred working more spontaneously** closer to the deadline. (ChatGPT, my emphasis)

The phrases in bold indicate to me that British James was critical, Chinese Mei silent and group-oriented, and Egyptian Ahmed relational, which fits the dominant West versus non-West individualist-low-context versus collectivist-high-context paradigm, which, again, fits with a Western Orientalist imagination.

At the end of the description, without prompting, ChatGPT asked:

If you like, I can also make it **more academic (with theory references like Hall, or Hofstede)**, expand it to **800–1200 words for an assignment**, or restructure it into **fieldnotes + analysis format**, which many ethnography assignments require. (ChatGPT, its emphasis)

I did not want another version, but wanted to see what analysis it would come up with. I therefore responded with 'In just short points provide an analysis

from Hall and Hofstede'. The following are two of the points it then produced, which confirmed to me my suspicions that the description did in fact represent these models of analysis:

(1) Hall (1976)—High vs Low Context Communication. ... James demonstrates a low-context communication style (direct, informal brainstorming), while Mei shows characteristics of a higher-context style, preferring preparation and careful responses before speaking. ...

(2) Hofstede (2003)—Uncertainty Avoidance and Work Style. Mei's preference for structured planning and outlines reflects higher uncertainty avoidance, whereas James' willingness to work closer to the deadline suggests lower uncertainty avoidance and a more flexible approach to academic tasks. (ChatGPT, my references added)

The way that it refers back to the detail of the description is convincing within the remit of the models being used. My concern here is that there are of course other models which would provide very different explanations and indeed very different descriptions, as I will demonstrated below.

I then asked, 'Why did you begin with Hofstede and Hall instead of Canagarajah?'. I referred here to Canagarajah because I felt that his reference to spatiality and multilingualism (2018) would generate a very different ethnographic description to the one so far provided. ChatGPT replied that:

They are the most **commonly taught, foundational frameworks** for analysing intercultural encounters, especially in early-stage university assignments. They provide **clear, easy-to-apply categories** ... which makes them a typical starting point. (ChatGPT, its emphasis)

The implication here that I find quite disturbing is that 'early-stage' university work should involve 'easy-to apply categories' even if they represent a model which I feel is outdated in its simplistic 'national

culture' profiling which indeed Others the students being described. It also implies that all our students are intellectually incapable of handling more difficult concepts. This to me represents a dominant, naïvely positivist and bureaucratised academic discourse. It reflects the neoliberal requirement for easily measurable stages of student assessment—which thereby reduce the teaching of intercultural communication to falsely simplistically learnable categories (Collins, 2018).

To find out if ChatGPT would have been able to work with the very different Canagarajah model, I simply asked 'How would Canagarajah see this differently?' I was then impressed that, without telling it the details of his work, ChatGPT showed that it knew all about it in its reply that:

By emphasising adaptability and shared practices inspired by Canagarajah, the account would highlight collaborative strategies and communicative flexibility, showing students co-constructing understanding rather than simply expressing fixed cultural communication styles—a more **critical, contemporary approach** that ... are often **introduced later** because they are **less formulaic and more interpretive**. (ChatGPT, its emphasis)

Again, the last part of this response falsely indicates that only more advanced students can deal with this approach. This is all the more concerning if the more 'formulaic' and presumed more elementary models conceal a racist Othering of particular so-labelled national or civilisational cultures which would only be revealed in the more critical discussion in later years of study. This would be a bit like teaching racist and sexist discourses to first year students because they are easier to understand, before Introducing them to critical race and gender studies in later years when they are 'more intellectually capable'. My point here is that it is not the fault of ChatGPT that the 'more established' discourse that it by default follows represents a default neoliberal régime in intercultural studies.

When I asked ChatGPT to 'provide a short, 150-word, alternative description of the three (British, Chinese and Egyptian) students working with each other

using Canagarajah's framework', it of course immediately did—showing, once again, that it has more critical awareness to reveal when asked. The following is an extract:

The students adjust their language, tone, and pacing in response to one another, negotiating meaning collaboratively. ... Communication is fluid, drawing on shared academic discourse and flexible use of English as a common resource. ... The group co-constructs both the task and their working relationship, demonstrating that successful collaboration arises not from fixed competence, but from the ability to adapt and align communicative practices in situ. (ChatGPT)

I feel that this does indeed indicate a fairly good perhaps beginning representation of Canagarajah's perspective. It focuses not on false categories of cultural difference but instead on how complex and hybrid cultural identities can be made use of in interaction. It is clearly different in approach to the first description, and I think traceable to a particular reading of Canagarajah.

However, a strong note of caution in response to this is that it too is written by an AI device which has not actually observed any real-life interaction. The tone is just too abstract to be totally convincing. This would lead me to suspect, if it were submitted by a student, that it was written by AI. If it were preceded by a more tentative analysis of a particular, tightly-described event, in which the struggle to make sense, with all the phenomenological caution described above, was evident, then it might work. Indeed, a future research project might be a critical discourse comparison of texts (a) generated by AI and (b) written as the result of the intense real-life and community-based scholarship one finds in the work of such as Canagarajah.

Seeing these two quite different descriptions further highlights how, when looking around at behaviour in a university café, there are many things that can be noticed; and, indeed, what is noticed and how it is interpreted will depend on the espoused viewpoint of the onlooker. This reminds me of a reconstructed ethnographic account (Holliday, 2016, p. 327; 2019, pp. 27–28) where two friends, while sitting in a café, interrogate the cultural imaginations

they bestow on the people they see around them, the prejudices they represent, and the surface appearances that generate them. This then becomes an activity, not about noticing cultural differences, but about the origins of prejudice within the process of interculturality.

A further observation, in the first description, regarding the mistakes that AI can make, is that the three students are a mix of undergraduate and postgraduate which is unlikely if they are working on the same assignment. I also note that only the British student's city of origin is mentioned. This could be a form of Othering with regard to the Chinese and Egyptian students which is in line with the individualist-collectivist model in which only national or civilisational culture is relevant to their imagined identities. On the other hand, it could just be an innocent mistake where the reference to Manchester is just another part of the detail smoke-screen used to give the impression of authenticity.

The implication here is that ChatGPT could never be the 'neutral' interlocutor. On the other hand, no human interlocutor could be neutral. Because of the complexity of competing positions in any moment of small culture formation on the go, multiple and perhaps Othering and even self-Othering discourses will always be at play, as all of us are subject to the grand and personal narratives that surround us.

Conclusion

This has been an unusually difficult paper to write because every time I look at what ChatGPT produces it also takes me into an interrogation of the deep complexities of how it is possible to research and write about the intercultural—which I think also relates to how social science more generally is carried out and produced. I will therefore try to gain some clarification by summarising what I have discovered about AI with particular reference to the free version of ChatGPT, but also how this mirrors our own academic practice.

(1) A particular danger of using ChatGPT is that it can falsely appear to have direct engagement with the real world when in fact it cannot. At the same time, this reminds us of how we researchers also allow apparent and false engagement

with the real world which is falsely represented by naïve positivist methods and neoliberal structures. (2) The falseness of these methods of representation both with ChatGPT and our own practice can be hidden in detail. (3) ChatGPT will follow this established yet false line of representation until we challenge it, at which point it will more skilfully produce critical and deCentred arguments. We also need to work hard to challenge our own academic practice in order to achieve deCentred understandings. (4) However, no matter what ChatGPT appears to be able to do, it can never ‘be there’ in the settings it appears to represent. We therefore need to learn from this to do everything we can to demonstrate how we base our research on ‘being there’ in settings that are authentic to our experience. (5) Seeing that what ChatGPT produces is not ‘real’ should heighten our awareness of ‘what is real’ in our own writing.

It therefore becomes apparent that AI indeed ‘mirrors our ideological blind spots’ and, when we realise this, ‘pushes us toward sharper criticality and reflexivity’; and accusing it of being biased ‘without entering into critical and reflexive conversations with it’ is ‘unfair’ (Dervin, 2026, pp. i, 11).

As an epilogue, I uploaded a nearly finished draft of this paper to ChatGPT and asked it to draft and abstract and a conclusion. What it instantly produced looked competent on the surface; but I could not use them because they did not quite say what I thought the paper was about. I then began to coach it to improve the drafts, reminding it to write in the style of which I approve, asking it to find examples of my successfully published abstracts. An objective of this activity was to help me find out if there were points I thought I had made in the paper which in fact I had not. This then helped me edit the paper to bring out more clearly the main points I wanted to make, and to write my own conclusion. Here ChatGPT is not being asked to write for me, but instead being asked as a research and writing assistant to help me write—with full knowledge of all its faults and also mine. After editing the whole paper and uploading again, I asked for another version of the abstract. It was not as good as I could do, I guess because there are other things out there which it was using which I would not; but at least a better starting point. What I will do when I have written my abstract, using its advice, but with my own knowledge of my academic community, I will upload that, keep the chat, thus educating my research and writing assistant to help better next

time. Eventually it might learn to write abstracts for me, but after huge input from my knowledge of the world I engage with to help it.

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