



## Established institutional vs. hybrid and private intercultural learning and agency: yin-yang discourses

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In trying to make sense of the difficulties we can encounter with complex data when researching the intercultural, it is perhaps useful to think of two conflicting discourses of culture. By discourse here I mean a way of thinking about and constructing the world through language and images. The two discourses are described in the table.

<b>Established essentialist discourse of culture</b>	<b>De-centred hybridity discourse of culture</b>
Precisely defining the national or civilisational culture 'Intercultural communication' -Across hard culture boundaries -Measurable 'intercultural competence' -Adopting 'native' language and culture Useful for educational institutions -Teaching difference and how to adopt Specialist knowledge: -'I don't have expertise in intercultural communication or multicultural issues'	Messy and creative -Personal trajectories and agency -Interculturality = self in others and others in self -Multiple culture flows and innovation -Bringing diverse linguacultures -'We are all hybrid' -Small culture formation on the go Doesn't fit easily into educational structures -Why we prefer facilitation instead of teaching In all of us - but unrecognised Driven to 'private sites of learning'

The discourse on the left is 'established' in the sense that it is most often voiced and is encouraged by how nation states have, in our upbringing, education and media, commonly been framed as essentially different to each other with their own separate languages and cultures. This viewpoint has been criticised as the artificial result of how nation states have been politically constructed (e.g. Delanty 2006). The established discourse is also convenient for academic structures because it lends itself to measurement and a body of knowledge or subject matter than can be 'mastered' as a specialism and taught. This is because it is full of details of cultural difference which, though mostly false, can be described as technical content. Hence, educators and other involved parties can say that they do not have the expertise to fully understand or teach it. There is also the hidden racism implicit in the 'us'- 'them' construct of 'native' being better. Within this discourse, migrants therefore need to be taught to adapt to and integrate with what are constructed as 'native' values and behaviour.

The de-centred discourse on the right of the table suffers from being much harder to pin down. Indeed, claiming hybridity is to resist definition. However, a lot of it is to do with what we all do every day in the complicated small culture formation on the go of making sense of who we are with others. This 'everyday' is intercultural in that we are always struggling to position ourselves and our narratives of life with different groups, friends, professions, leisure, politics and so on, all with their different cultural features. The difficulty that migrants have is not with their intercultural abilities, which they too have been practising all their lives, but instead with lack of familiarity with foreign structures and systems within which they lack status and capital. They already know how structures and systems work *per se*, because they too exist in different forms within all societies; but the task is made harder by the prejudices with which migrants are received. Some of these prejudices come from the left side of the table, which can give the false impression that people from other places bring nothing of value with them and have to learn everything 'here'. Perhaps it is also the notion of hybridity as the norm for all of us (e.g. Bhabha 1994; Hall 1996) that makes this de-centred discourse of culture indigestible in educational institutions because it implies that there are already aspects of being migrants in all of us, and aspects of us expert intercultural actors in all of them.

If these hybrid, messy, creative and boundary-dissolving abilities are not accepted by educational institutions, naturally creative and agentive migrants are driven to practise them in private sites away from the scrutiny of the teacher and the institution. While they represent threads that bring us all together, they are very difficult to find because of their de-centred, third space nature (Holliday & Amadasi 2020).

### Private sites of learning

A good example of 'private sites' is described by Canagarajah (1999: 88-90) in his book with the telling title, *Resisting linguistic imperialism*. Sri Lankan secondary school children have an American English language textbook. In it, two bank robbers are escaping in a car. The children feel that they are more than this narrow, 'American', implicitly 'native' example of English and write in their own rich cultural narratives in speech bubbles and other scribbles in the margins, in which they *appropriate* the language, in their own super-intelligent image, by turning the robbers into two lovers in a Tamil film. Their teachers have no idea that this is happening; and the children's linguistic ability in the scribbled marginalia, which is of a far higher level than what is displayed in classroom responses and writing exercises, is never seen. Their agentive creativity does not fit into the formal objectives of the syllabus.

Another example is minority children in an Inner London school 'playing' with language by imitating the accents of children from other linguistic groups while apparently 'misbehaving' in class. Again, this 'play' shows a higher linguistic ability than in formal classroom tasks (Rampton 2007).

This is why there need to be very particular conditions to enable such agentive creative expression to become visible in educational settings, as with the using of photographs to engage with the cultural pasts of children of migrants (Baraldi & Iervese 2017).

### Not what me might think

It is easy to think that the de-centred hybridity discourse is difficult to find because it is surrounded and beleaguered by the domination of the established essentialist discourse. This is shown in Figure 1.

However, Duan (2007) found a different sort of relationship. His research critiqued the dominant essentialist discourse in China and everywhere else that 'Chinese school children only think about examinations'. And, indeed, he found in their personal diaries, a de-centred hybridity discourse that 'although we work hard for our exams, we are also desperate for personal time away from examinations' and that 'nobody understands who we really are'

However, when Duan interviewed the *very same* school children 'more formally', they overwhelmingly told him the *opposite* of what they had said before - that 'we are only interested in exams', thus confirming the dominant discourse.

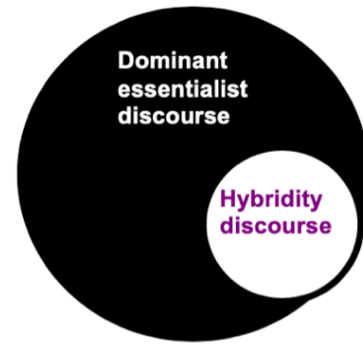


Figure 1

### All the discourses can operate at the same time

Duan therefore had to think again. He found the Taoist concept of Yin and Yang useful. This is a huge philosophical and spiritual discussion for which there is no space here. But Duan gives us a glimpse:

This was my adaptation of a core Taoist concept held by Zhuangzi, called *zuo wang*, literally meaning 'sitting in forgetfulness', through which we might attain a state of absolute freedom, in which we forgot the distinctions between others and the self, and equate life and death, so all things become one'. (2007: 71)

From this he referred to his analysis as 'sitting on my data':

What I meant by 'sitting on my data' was that if we could forget ... the distinctions of data as 'them' and the researcher as the 'self', then we may arrive at a better understanding of the issues under scrutiny. I found that the whole data, like a flower bed, may, from a distance, appear to be brown, but when observed close-up, be found to contain vivid whites, reds or yellows. The researcher needs then to identify which colour among the flowers she considers most significant, and to alter her gaze accordingly. (ibid)

From this, Duan comes to yin and yang, as represented in Figure 2, where opposites curl around each other, and the dots inside each half indicate that each also contains the seed of the other (2007: 248). This then means that the opposing discourses can be present at the same time even in the same person, and that all of us can sometimes, at different times and for different reasons adopt the established essentialist discourse

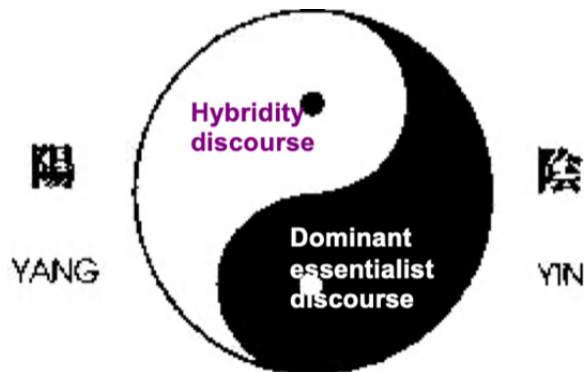


Figure 2

even if it means denying who we know we are as represented in the simultaneous more personal hybridity discourse.

There could be many reasons for this contradictory coexistence. It may be that we are not aware of the presence of competing discourses, that we are just too tired to resist, or that it gives us recognition within particular settings, roles, and structures. It may be strategic essentialism, where we appear to adopt the stereotypes imposed upon us in order to temporarily gain space in the face of oppression (e.g. Motamedi et al 2016). It may be that we actually wish to be considered or taught to be 'native' in the essentialist sense because 'assimilation' seems the only way. Then we would need to consider how far all of this might be the result of some sort of false-consciousness, which, in turn, further interrogates our role and responsibility as researchers and educators.

## Reflection on quantitative data collection

These observations about the probable mixing of contradictory discourses of culture might help explain the difficulty in getting clear pictures during research. Accounts of the quantitative part of the Child-Up project indicated that the complexities of the settings often defied being pinned down. The agreed definitions of concepts such as 'migrant' and 'intercultural training' did not fit what was or might have been going on. There were problems gaining access to institutions and people. This was affected by different social and political conditions in different country and local settings and their diverse agendas and positioning.

However, these 'problems' produced important unexpected, procedural findings. What 'goes wrong' in research projects is actually important data about the setting and about the nature of research. It also indicates that quantitative data collection is just as intersubjective in the sense that how people respond and indeed what sorts of questions are asked and how instruments are delivered, with what sorts of definitions, can be as much to do with how we all construct the world without various discourses and narratives as is qualitative data collection. With critical and politically aware researchers this must especially be the case. Both can and should be within a common constructivist paradigm.

Certainly for the future we should consider preceding quantitative data collection with some sort of macro ethnography so that we are better informed about what sorts of quantitative questions to ask and by what means. This is the other way round to what is commonly thought, where it is wrongly believed that 'quantitative research' is somehow safe in its objectivity and therefore provides validity for 'qualitative research' that follows.

We also need to remember that we researchers are people who solve problems of representation and voice. One such problem is how to satisfy sponsors who are looking for objective statistical outcomes to inform policy while at the same time including the rich more subjective findings that represent the de-centred hybridity discourse of culture. This requires skillful writing. It also requires clarity of thinking in which we can distinguish operational definitions from constructed realities - the difference between agreed definitions of 'migration' and how it is constructed by the people we try to understand in our research, including our own constructions.

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