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Researching the Intercultural: Intersubjectivity and the Problem with Postpositivism

Adrian Holliday, Canterbury Christ Church University

Malcolm N MacDonald, Warwick University

In intercultural communication studies, the positivist preoccupation with objectivist, essentialist, solid large cultures has been replaced by a postmodern recognition that the intercultural is liquid and ideologically constructed. However, a postpositivist resistance to this paradigm change, while recognizing the dangers of essentialism, continues to be objectivist and fails to address the intersubjective nature of the ideological construction of culture. This results in a soft essentialism. This methodological failure of postpositivism is driven by a neoliberal technicalized commodification of quantitative and qualitative methods that does not address the subjective implicatedness of researchers. It therefore prevents an understanding of the liquid nature of the intercultural and sustains the neo-racist implications of essentialism. An example of this is commodifying international students as culturally problematic to serve a quantifiable notion of intercultural competence. The methodological flaws of postpositivism can only be avoided by means of an approach to researching cultural groups in which large culture concepts such as nation are viewed as one of many possible, emergent, ideologically constructed variables rather than as the starting point for research.

INTRODUCTION

This article concerns the impact of paradigm conflict within the sub-discipline of intercultural studies. It maintains that the intersubjective, co-constructed, non-essentialist core of the intercultural can only be fully appreciated within a postmodern paradigm. However, this advancement in understanding continues to be challenged by an objectivist, neo-essentialist postpositivism that inherits from positivism a false foregrounding of purportedly objective national or ethnic, mutually exclusive 'large cultures'. The argument for a paradigm shift from positivism to postmodernism appeared almost 20 years ago with the 'small culture' critique of using 'large cultures' as the default starting point (Holliday 1999), citing current discussions in the sociology of culture (e.g. Crane 1994), and an already established constructivist sociology of knowledge (Berger and Luckmann 1979). However, the establishment of this paradigm shift is still a point of discussion 10 years later (MacDonald and O'Regan 2011), as are concerns that there is still a powerful, invalidating positivist influence **[page 1 ends here]** (e.g. Dervin 2011) which then resonates with the plea by Kumaravadivelu (2012) for a postmodern resistance to the outdated yet sustained positivist, modernist and culturally Othering grand categories of Englishes, speakerhood and identity. It is within this ongoing struggle against a still present positivism that our paper is located. We speak mainly about research into the intercultural in the social

sciences, in psychology, sociology, education, business studies, and health (Martin et al. 2012), acknowledging that there are parallel discussions within the humanities and the hermeneutic tradition.

We will begin with a discussion of paradigm shift as scientific revolution and then look at how postpositivism within intercultural studies is methodologically problematic and has emerged from the current neoliberal conditions of the university sector. We will illustrate our discussion with what we consider to be postpositivist research into 'internationalization' and 'intercultural competence' which continues to imply cultural deficiency in East-Asian students and thus perpetuates neo-essentialist and neo-racist scholarship. Throughout, we employ the term 'postpositivism' as an apt description of the approach which some researchers of the intercultural choose because they subscribe to its tenets even though the researchers themselves might not identify them as such.

PARADIGM SHIFT

We follow Kuhn's (1970) notion of paradigm shift as scientific revolution in which an old paradigm is overturned and replaced as a result of new discoveries. Within this shift, we frame postpositivism as a recidivist attempt to protect the scientific order and established careers of the old paradigm (Kuhn 1970: 151–152). We will argue that postpositivist resistance comprises a technicalized commodification of research methodology and a quantification of the intercultural that satisfies the demands of the neoliberal university.

We are, however, aware that our construction of postpositivism as resistance to paradigm revolution is itself a postmodern perception, and that its subscribers instead simply think of paradigms as a choice of parallel approaches that look at the intercultural in different ways (Zhu 2016). There are therefore persistent conflicts not only between paradigms but also between those who subscribe to the notion of paradigm revolution and those who do not. It is also important to note that the significance of framing the post-modern shift as a scientific revolution is that, once the new understandings have arrived, there is no going back (Kuhn 1970: 103), and that the postpositivist denial of paradigm revolution is therefore a retreat.

The positivist paradigm

The postmodern paradigm revolution in researching the intercultural is a response to the unsatisfactory nature of positivism. Positivism is a belief in an ordered world in which there is an objectively describable reality (Martindale **[page 2 ends here]** 1960: 53). This enables seemingly objective descriptions of separate large ethnic or national cultures that explain and predict behaviour as functional and contributive parts, as projected by the early 19th century social theory of Emile Durkheim (1964) and the subsequent highly technical description of the structural-functional workings of society in Talcott Parsons' The social system (1951), then cited by Hofstede (2001: 10). Such descriptions are used in intercultural training to prepare visitors to other 'cultures' with behavioural types that they can compare with their own (e.g. Hofstede 2003; Lewis 2005; Bolten 2014). This false cultural profiling has also provided a mechanism for Othering large cultural groups. For example, East-Asian students are wrongly characterized as lacking critical thinking and autonomy because of their so-called 'collectivist' 'Confucian cultures' (Zhao and Coombs 2012). This profiling has led to an ostensibly well-wishing but in effect patronizing cultural

relativism where such students are not expected to meet the interactive requirements of the so-called communicative classroom (e.g. Kharma and Hajjaj 1985; Locastro 1996; Bax 2003).

While positivism may work in some applications of science, in applied linguistics it has been widely critiqued for its inaccurate essentialist Othering of East Asian students (e.g. Kubota 2001; Clark and Gieve 2006; Dervin 2011). Moreover, this differential profiling of particular cultural groups is thought by many to be neo-racist (Jordan and Weedon 1995; Spears 1999; Hervik 2013) and particularly so with reference to East Asian students (Kubota 2002).

The postmodern shift

Throughout the social sciences the postmodern revolution reveals the unreliability and indeed ideological nature of structural metanarratives (Lyotard 1979: xxiv–v) and critiques the established grand narrative of 'solid' national and ethnic large cultures by asserting that they are instead socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann 1979), 'imagined' (Anderson 2006) and 'liquid' (Dervin 2011, citing Bauman). The functionalist sociology of Durkheim and Parsons's structural-functionalism have long been opposed by the alternative social action theory of Max Weber that places the individual in dialogue with – rather than being contained and defined by – social structure (Weber 1964; Dobbin 1994: 118; Stråth 2008: 33). Scholars such as Beck and Sznaider (2006: 3) have argued that the structural-functional synchronistic mapping of one-nation, one-culture and one-language as the starting point for research in the social sciences is ideologically motivated by a methodological nationalism which derives from the 19th century European grand narrative of the nation state.

Understanding that the notion of large culture is an ideological social construction has a significant impact on researching the intercultural. The postmodern turn in qualitative research and ethnography recognises that researchers are implicated in subjectively co-constructing meaning with the people they research and that there are no a priori definitions of culture that **[page 3 ends here]** can be looked at with objective detachment (Clifford 1986). This enables a focus on how social actors, including the researchers, co-construct the intercultural environment in which social action takes place, and how their multiple narratives are then influenced by the politics of the research event (e.g. Amadasi and Holliday 2018). This does not mean that the researchers need to be insiders to the settings they are looking at as long as they recognize that their own positioning is part of this intersubjective politics. In specific relation to the intercultural, the core methodological approach therefore needs to be broadly ethnographic because this allows lived intercultural experiences of all involved parties to emerge and a subsequent creative development of methods in response to the nature of the social setting in which the research is carried out (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 15; Merrill and West 2009: 114; Holliday 2016: 21). Requiring that research engage with intersubjectivity is therefore at the core of the postmodern shift. Such creative ethnography has been instrumental in appreciating hitherto unrecognized cultural realities in a number of ground-breaking works in applied linguistics (e.g. Cameron et al. 1992; Canagarajah 1999). With regard to East Asian students, Li and Dervin's (forthcoming) multilingual ethnography of schools in Finland and China, involving 'never-ending struggle' to make sense and 'learning from each

other', finds intercultural commonalities that run against large culture stereotypes through a mutually creative and boundary dissolving interculturality.

The postmodern paradigm has also produced a critical cosmopolitan argument (Delanty et al. 2008), supported by critical and postcolonial sociology (Said 1978; Hall 1991; Bhabha 1994), that it is a Western grand narrative that has falsely defined and marginalized non-Western cultural realities. The 'collectivism' attributed to East Asian students is one such Western construction of deficiency (Kubota 2003; Canagarajah 2004; Gong 2009; Montgomery 2010; Rajagopalan 2012). Holliday (2016: 32ff) has framed this process of Othering as an apparently well-wishing though in reality deeply patronising West as steward discourse.

Postpositivist recidivism

We wish to argue that, as a research approach, postpositivism responds to some of the new understandings of the postmodern revolution by accepting the diversity of the intercultural and the subsequent dangers of stereotyping. However, it also maintains the positivist conviction that this diversity remains within the certainty of large national or ethnic culture boundaries. These large cultures therefore remain the basic units of investigation because they can be sampled, triangulated and objectively represented by means of presumed researcher-neutral interviews and observations. It is this pulling back to a positivist view of the overall structure of culture and how it should be investigated that leads us to frame postpositivism as recidivist. **[page 4 ends here]**

We will argue that this recidivist position has the appearance of being successful and thus remains dominant within intercultural studies because it enables a safer avoidance of subjectivity and allows a technicalized commodification of methods that satisfies the current needs of the neoliberal university. We will then go on to argue that claiming such an objectivist position and continuing to focus primarily on national cultural groups seriously distorts how the intercultural can be described. It gives a false impression of certainty and is therefore methodologically unsound. The epistemology of the intersubjective ethnographic project is therefore sacrificed for the sake of an apparent methodological certainty.

TECHNICALIZED COMMODIFICATION, NEOLIBERALISM, AND 'MIXED METHODS'

The wider economic and political drivers of this recidivist, technicalized commodification of methods are implicit in the neoliberal agenda of the university sector. Kubota (2016, citing Block et al., Park Lo, Flores, and Holborow) describes how the neoliberal agendas of marketizing educational outputs has enabled government manipulation of university research agendas. This is not a new process. C Wright Mills in 1959 warns of a 'bureau-cratisation' of research, driven by an 'abstracted empiricism', that serves the institutions of the state in its new agenda of liberalism (Mills 1970). Where the performance of university academics, in the face of increasing competition for scarce resources, is increasingly measured through their success in gaining external funding and publications in approved journals, the choice of research methods may have more to do with meeting this market requirement than with what the research requires (Kubota 2016: 488, citing Altbach, and Darder). This in turn encourages safer, more quantifiable approaches.

This neoliberal desire for commodification impacts on how the intercultural is conceptualized. Collins (2018: 178) describes how a particular university commodifies the concept of 'intercultural communication' to populate programmes that increase its marketplace image as a provider of student employability in a globalized world. He argues that this commodification is blind to paradigm issues and encourages essentialist, 'taken-for-granted, ambiguous and malleable approach to culture and interculturality that equates culture with nation'. This neoliberal commodification of the intercultural resonates with Shuter's (2008: 38) and Kumaravadivelu's (2007: 68) critiques of how iconic concepts such as 'intercultural communication competence', 'intercultural adaptation', 'acculturation', 'enculturation', and 'integration' have little value other than making scholarship look 'scientific'. There is a resonance here with an old discussion of how disciplinary categories are the product of university structures that cling to more traditional collections of specialist knowledge blocks and their associated professional and academic commodity value (Bernstein 1971; Esland 1971). This technicalized commodification of concepts **[page 5 ends here]** facilitates the postpositivist trend to pin down, define and measure the precise gradation of 'intercultural competence' and 'intercultural learning' by means of decades of increasingly complex performance lists and models (Deardorf 2009; Humphrey 2007; Reid 2013), especially within the domains of intercultural education and training (e.g. Byram et al. 2001; Feng et al. 2009; MacDonald et al. 2009). The technicalized commodification of concepts then contributes to the neoliberal agenda through what Cribb and Gewirtz (2013: 344–345) refer to as the 'hollow university' subordinating educational concepts to 'spin', 'branding', 'impression management', and 'reputation drivers' with a relative disregard for how they actually effect pedagogic processes. All of this helps to isolate 'international' students as culturally separate and therefore in need of separate training and competencies to 'home' students (Collins 2018), thus falling back into the positivist, neo-racist profiling described above.

This technicalized commodification also extends to how the intercultural is researched. An example of this is the employment throughout the social sciences of the 'mixed methods' approach. Creswell and Creswell (2018) describe this as a systematic integrating of qualitative and quantitative data collection (14) which 'has evolved into a set of procedures that proposal developers and study designers can use in planning' (213) and which is established in key publications (214). We see no problem with creatively employing different and diverse methods ranging from auto-ethnography to statistical analysis. However, the problem with 'mixed methods' is the fronting of a highly technicalized and commodified combination of 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' as a necessary technology which is postpositivist in its lack of engagement with a developing understanding of the intersubjectivities of the social setting as the research progresses. This is seen in Johnson et al.'s (2007: 123) description of nineteen types of mixing quantitative and qualitative methods and the fronting of 'mixed methods' alongside qualitative and quantitative in the British research council's recommendation for core training of doctoral students (ESRC 2015: 7, 9) and the framing of the researcher as a manager and indeed 'connoisseur' of combinations of methods (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2010: 8). There is a strong impression here that adding and combining methods as a 'toolkit' for component parts is a better assurance of validity and reliability than developing methods that are suitable to an emerging research focus and understanding of the

intersubjective nature of the research setting during the process of the research. This view also strengthens our opinion that the postpositivist perception of paradigm is a procedural technical choice rather than a revolution in understanding.

The mixed methods approach also fits the neoliberal scenario. Candidates for funding or academic posts may feel safer listing an impressive postpositivist mix of methods in their research portfolio than trying to explain how they allow methods to evolve in the field within a broader postmodern ethnographic design. Similarly, when they are asked what 'data sets' they are able to deploy, postpositivism makes it easier to claim data that has an objective stand-alone independence from the researcher and that has been collected by a **[page 6 ends here]** predefined and therefore replicable mixing of methods. This commodification of methods can also be seen in the reduction of broad philosophical and methodological approaches such as phenomenology and grounded theory to tightly separated methods such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Janesick (2000: 390) refers to this process as 'methodolatry, a combination of method and idolatry, to describe a preoccupation with selecting and defending methods to the exclusion of the actual substance of the story being told'. It is important here to note that this neoliberal impact on research might originate in the West but is widespread (e.g. Shajahan 2014). In the final panel discussion at the 2017 conference on Criticality in education (research) in Helsinki, academics from across the world complained about lacking freedom to engage in more creative research in social science because of neoliberal pressures.

COMPARING METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

We will now expand upon three points of critical comparison between postpositivist and postmodern approaches: prescription versus emergence; a priori versus a postiori inferencing of social groups; and independence of data versus researcher engagement.

Prescription versus emergence

We have argued two conflicting pictures of methodological validity: (a) the postpositivist imposing of, for example, 'mixed methods' to increase validity from the outset; or (b) the postmodern opening up of methods to respond to the emerging realities of the research setting.

The postpositivist agenda to pre-empt how methods should be mixed is exemplified in the statement by Wang and Kulich (2015: 43, citing Deardorff, Jackson, Du, and Fantini) that, 'due to the complex nature of intercultural competence, … leading scholars agree that a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods is the best way to assess it'. It is unfair to critique researchers for following the advice of others in the literature in this way; but it is as though Wang and Kulich believe that qualitative methods alone are not really up to the job of dealing with complexity, and that they can therefore follow a safer option of methods that are prescribed by others rather than working out what to do in their own developing engagement with the research setting.

By contrast, the postmodern paradigm finds it unnecessary to prescribe a separate 'mixed methods' approach because the mixing of methods is what all researchers can do as part of the normal quest for getting to the bottom of things—not to make findings more 'objective', but to arrive at a more convincing thick description. This sense of emergence follows the classic sequence of ethnography in which methods are determined in response

to emerging realities in the research setting. They can be diverse and creative and can include quantitative or any appropriate methods. The development and **[page 7 ends here]** deployment of these methods also acknowledge and manage the subjectivity of the researcher.

The postpositivist representation of 'mixed methods' that each have a validity that is independent of the researcher and the emerging nature of the setting may be in danger of entirely missing the point. For example, methods that seek to quantify the achievement of some hypostatized model of 'intercultural competence' according to an a priori listing of its features will find it hard to notice unlisted features or the possibility that 'intercultural competence' is not a significant feature of what is going on in the setting at all.

A priori versus a postiori

Second, the postpositivist argument is that, although large national and ethnic cultural categories can be essentialist, they are a useful starting points for investigation because they provide models or hypotheses that can then be tested. These cultural categories are often conceived of in binary terms as homogenizing blocs: for example 'Eastern' versus 'Western' (relating to 'values'), or 'home' versus 'international', 'European' versus '(East) Asian' (relating to students). However these cultural categories are realized, they are premised on some form of a priori cultural groupings derived from the nationality of the people being researched.

Postmodern constructivism argues instead that, even when putting aside its neo-racist implications, nationality is only one of many variables. There is no problem per se with researching the experiences and behaviour of people who come from particular nationality groups; but we must appreciate the complex intersubjectivities that this involves. Straight nationality comparisons are virtually impossible to isolate from other small culture factors such as profession or family background, political or religious affiliation, or from how these variables are constructed by both participants and researchers at any given time. How or why nationality or any other variable of cultural identity is constructed must always be the main question; and participants' rejection of such variables must always be allowed to emerge. For example, Holliday (2017: 208) had to re-align his entire research paper around his participants refusing to acknowledge nationality as a labelling factor in their experience of PhD study. However, postpositivist research that looks at nationality as a defining feature for the purpose of defining it more is truncated with circularity.

Independence of data versus researcher engagement

Third, the postmodern claim is that data about the intercultural cannot be made sense of by researchers who were not intersubjectively involved in its collection and are therefore themselves part of the data. It is therefore only the data-researcher totality as a set of sense-making that can be transported on to be learnt from by new projects. **[page 8 ends here]**

However, the postpositivist position relies instead on technicalized research methods to reduce the influence of the researcher on the collection of data. The 'mixed methods' formula aims to reduce the subjectivity and increase the representativeness of the qualitative 'database' by triangulating it with a quantitative 'database' (Creswell and Creswell 2018: 14). In terms of ontology, the researcher is thus perceived to be both part

of and detached from the social world which is being researched. In terms of epistemology, knowledge is perceived as being both socially constructed and an objectively verifiable reality. However philosophically, this epistemological and ontological dualism within the research design is incommensurable. Knowledge cannot be both intersubjectively constituted and empirically verifiable (epistemology); and the researcher cannot simult- aneously be part of the social world and detached from the object of research (ontology). By contrast, in the postmodern paradigm, knowledge is always socially constructed; and the researcher and those people they research are irreducibly intertwined within the social world which they co-inhabit.

The difference between postpositivist and postmodern paradigms is particularly evident in the two strands of contemporary intercultural research we take as exemplars in this article. Many investigations carried out into internationalization on university campuses draw on well-established theories of either social cohesion (e.g. Taha and Cox 2016) or intercultural competence (e.g. Prieto-Flores et al. 2016) in order to investigate the inter- relations between students from different large 'cultures'. These two papers, while well- designed in their own terms, exemplify two features of postpositivist studies. They both assume the existence of social groups defined by their bounded nationality within the wider society of the university, and the unitary nature of the language each group speaks. As Taha and Cox explicitly state, 'co-nationality implies a common language and cultural similarities' (2016: 189). To investigate issues that are assumed to arise from these postulates, predictable a priori 'mixed methods' are used, such as quantitative question- naires and qualitative observations and interviews (Taha and Cox), or quantitative surveys and qualitative 'daily life stories' (Prieto-Flores et al.). On this basis, these studies claim to confirm that campus sociality is splintered along lines of nationality, and to establish the efficacy of the theories posited from the outset for the development of social integration or intercultural learning. We believe that these outcomes were quite predictable because the a priori 'mixed methods' approach do nothing to counter the categories which were presupposed relating to the social situation and the subjects under investigation. There seems to be no room for the unexpected to emerge.

As we make clear at the beginning of the article, we are not arguing that engagement with the intersubjective nature of intercultural relations is necessarily a recent occurrence; we are rather seeking to reveal the impact that technicalized research methods have had upon the sub-discipline of intercultural studies, in what appears to be a retreat from the advances made in applied linguistics and linguistic anthropology in the second half of the twentieth **[page 9 ends here]** century we have already mentioned (e.g. Cameron et al. 1992; Norton 1997; Canagarajah 1999). We go on to illustrate some of the ways this recidivism can be resisted; for there remains a rich fount of intercultural studies whose approach to the social spaces which they investigate remains open to the contingent nature of linguistic and social groupings. The research approaches adopted by these postmodern studies are sensitive enough to capture the complexities of the ethnic and linguistic mingling which takes place in social spaces worldwide. In a recent study, Schneider (2018) uses ethnographic observations and interviews to investigate a linguistically diverse area in Belize. Acknowledging the persistence of recidivist tendencies in intercultural research, Schneider asserts:

> One possibility to approach the question of how languages and communities come into being, and to thus avoid essentialist concepts of language methodologically, is to step back and take other social phenomena than languages and communities as a starting point for the study of human interaction. (391)

On this trajectory, the paper goes on to examine 'how economic conditions and work life shape the linguistic trajectories of speakers and the emergence of groups that share language practices' (391).

The emergence of 'modern' linguistic anthropology in the 1970s did go some way towards challenging the hegemonic equivalence between language and nation state (e.g. Fishman 1972; Gumperz and Hymes 1972; Labov 1972). However, in doing do, it also tended to propose alternative, reified sub-groupings, such as 'speech community', which also posited an equivalence between language and 'culture'. Despite these becoming the stock-in-trade of sociolinguistics in the latter part of the twentieth century, with hindsight these sociolinguistic sub-groupings can be seen to exhibit some of the same drawbacks as methodological nationalism, since they can also 'embody an essentialist view of culture and use it as a taken-for-granted variable in understanding and describing communicative differences' (Sarangi 1995: 100).

Most recently one strand of applied linguistics research has gone some way towards capturing the emergent, fluid and complex nature of intercultural relations. This arises from the self-styled 'trans-' perspectives towards intercultural research (e.g. Li 2018). One large-scale project is particularly illustrative of the postmodern approach. The AHRC-funded Translation and Translanguaging project (TLANG) uses linguistic ethnography to investigate 'linguistic and cultural transformations in superdiverse wards in four UK cities'. As with Schneider, research design within this project is restrained as to assumptions regarding the relationship between social grouping and language in order to engage with the full complexity of 'multilingualism as a resource where multiple repertoires are in play in translational cities'.[1] Out of 36 working papers produced at the time of writing, drawing upon a panoply of ethnographic methods, two papers were presented at the 2016 conference of the International Association of Language and Intercultural **[page 10 ends here]** Communication (IALIC) in Barcelona. Reflecting the approach of 'structured visual linguistic ethnography' taken by the TLANG project as a whole (Callaghan et al. 2018), these two papers use innovative and creative methods such as combining video-recordings with unstructured interviews, and the workshop-based production of collage (Bradley et al. 2018). In so doing, they are able to deploy a series of intersecting methods which are fully contextualized and responsive to the social situation under investigation. Not least, this postmodern use of research methods to investigate the relationship between languages and social groupings, assembled a postiori and sensitive to context, succeeds in dismantling one of the great shibboleths which is shared alike by methodological nationalism and modern sociolinguistics, the one-to-one correspondence of a language (or language variety) with nation, 'culture' or 'community'. By establishing the intersection and dynamic intermingling of languages between subjects within a social group, these papers succeed in challenging, if not indeed disproving, the ideologies which posit a homogeneity

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[1] 'TLANG', available at: https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/generic/tlang/index.aspxp

between language and a bounded community. Moreover, since the methods implemented within the project are commensurate with a constructivist epistemology, they conform to the ethnographic disciplines to ensure proper intersubjective research rigour.

RECOVERING INTERSUBJECTIVITY

In the previous section, we have exemplified three main features of researching the intercultural whereby postpositivist approaches resist the postmodern paradigm shift by prescribing the theoretical framework and methods before engaging with the social setting and emerging data, by positing a priori social groupings for subjects, and by reintroducing data analysis techniques amenable to objectivist criteria of verifiability. Underlying these three features, moreover, is the postpositivist reluctance to engage with the inter-subjectivity of the intercultural, in which the researcher and research methodology are implicated. Although qualitative elements of postpositivism may claim to be interpretivist, without an appreciation of intersubjectivity there will be epistemological problems. If interpretivism stays with a 'solid' view of culture and 'a simple review of what research participants say', and if 'their discourse is taken at face value' without an appreciation of the impact of the positionality of the researcher (Dervin 2011: 39), researchers will fall into 'the trap of Othering' (Holliday 2011: 21). For example, a statement by someone from an East Asian cultural background that 'we don't think critically in our culture' can easily be interpreted as evidence of lack of criticality in their large national or ethnic 'culture' as a whole. It is only when it is understood that both the person making the statement and the researcher interpreting it are taking a discursively constructed position that the intersubjectivity of the statement and its interpretation becomes clear. The constructivism of the postmodern approach would recognise that both what the person in question might say and what the researcher might think of this could well be at least momentary **[page 11 ends here]** constructions that are born of an essentialist discourse of culture in which 'East Asians lack criticality' that derives from an image of cultural deficiency and under-achievement (Kubota 2001). We have seen in the discussion of neoliberalism above how this construction has been operationalized within higher education institutions in Europe and North America, and has invaded the narrative of internationalization where it has then become normalized think-ing-as-usual (Collins 2018).

The outcome of this postpositivist misunderstanding is the erroneous, yet rampant and hegemonic, essentialist discourse that the national and 'Confucian' cultures of East Asian university students everywhere are expected to be problematic and deficient, and that whatever these students say about it confirms this (Grimshaw 2010; Ryan and Louie 2007: 407). We have already cited a recent example of this essentialist discourse, where Chinese language, writing forms and education are associated with cultural inability under the postpositivist smoke-screen of a socio-cultural approach (Zhao and Coombes 2012).

Nevertheless, the postpositivist focus on external neoliberal audiences at the expense of the necessary engagement with intersubjectivity parallels the notion of the 'hollow university' referred to earlier with a worrying notion of a hollow research methodology. This positivist fear of the subjective implicatedness of the researcher results in the weakened, superficial form of qualitative research that the postpositivists fear (Miller et al. 1998). Indeed, we would argue that it is not intersubjectively produced data, but rather data that is artificially separated from the intersubjective totality of the research project that lacks

'validity'. We argue that this shyness towards the openness of the postmodern paradigm is in effect an opportunity lost.

Instead of taking participants' statements about culture such as 'we don't think critically' at face value (which would be the 'collect data and run' postpositivist finish), researchers need to get to the bottom of why these participants are choosing to project this particular discourse of culture at this particular time. More importantly, researchers also need to get to the bottom of why they themselves are vulnerable to taking what is said at face value. It needs to be understood that the grand narratives that feed essentialist discourses of culture continue to surround and seduce us researchers and our methods through our institutions and media (Botting 1995; Goodson 2006); and the residues of these narratives persist in different permutations of, and splinters in, the way that we researchers, along with everyone else, all think about our lives (Lyotard 1979: 22). Researchers therefore constantly need to work hard to interrogate how they themselves are influenced by discourses and narratives that might lead them into being seduced by superficial data.

Here it is useful to take on the phenomenological discipline of uncovering whichever discourse is likely to lead to the trap of Othering in a particular research setting (Baumann 1996: 2, 10). Therefore, in the case of East Asian students it will help to try to think of them simply as students and to try and acquire what Alfred Schutz refers to as taking on the viewpoint of 'the **[page 12 ends here]** stranger' in order to bracket and 'place in question nearly everything that seems unquestionable to the members of the approached group' (1964: 96). In this way, we can at least try to recover an intersubjective engagement which is not reducible to the researchers' cultural positionality – whatever it may be.

In the postpositivist resistance to intersubjectivity, this bracketing may be misperceived as an attempt to remove the subjectivity of the researcher. This is not the case within the postmodern paradigm. Phenomenological bracketing represents researchers' very necessary interrogation of their own subjectivity – engaging not just with the Other of the research participant, but also with the Self of the researcher. As Paul Ricoeur writes in Soi-même comme un autre: 'l'Autre n'est pas seulement la contrepartie du Même, mais appartient à la constitution intime de son sens'[2] (1990: 380). If this interconnectedness between Self and Other is ignored, the latent cultural locatedness of researchers themselves can create a danger for any research into the intercultural before it has even got off the ground. To achieve this, it is necessary to set aside all obvious signs and symbols of cultural affiliation, such as nationality, citizenship, colour, or creed (after Appiah 2016), in order to gauge through the inductive process which is demanded by the sounds, signs, and symbols produced within the intersubjective encounter between the researcher and the researched.

To explore this necessity to engage with intersubjectivity further, we consider three stages through which this engagement is generated, transmitted and interpreted as text in the process of intercultural research. Within the postmodern approach to the research interview, the generation of the text becomes as far as possible an 'intercultural dialogue' (Holmes 2014). This notion of dialogue necessitates, for example, thinking away

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[2] 'The Other is not only the counterpart of the Same but belongs to the intimate constitution of its meaning.'

from what has become the default 'semi-structured' interview in favour of the 'reflexive' interview in which all parties jointly co-construct meaning (e.g. Block 2000; Mann 2011; Miller 2011). The interview becomes 'a potentially creative space between people' (Merrill and West 2009: 114) where the researchers themselves 'cannot, in a sense, write stories of others without reflecting' on their 'own histories, social and cultural locations as well as subjectivities and values' (5). The intercultural text is not simply something that the people in the interview state, but is co-constructed through the enactment of the interview, which is itself an instance of 'small culture formation on the go' (Amadasi and Holliday 2018). In this respect, the interview cannot simply be a process of researchers using interviews (or other methods) to investigate the 'cultures' of participants who are 'over there'. Rather, the dialogic encounter of the interview becomes itself constitutive of a 'micro-culture' which is being created dynamically and agentively between the researcher and the researched (Borghetti and Beaven 2018).

Rather than producing independent, and easily transportable 'data-sets', the postmodern co-construction of the intercultural text therefore includes a full account of the positioning of both the researcher and those they are researching. This is because the dialogue between the researcher and the people they **[page 13 ends here]** are research-ing cannot be extricated from the material conditions in which the text is produced. Examples of the extent of this dialogue are recent discussions around 'researching multilingually' that observe the intersubjectivity of dealing with translated and 'untranslatable' material (Holmes et al. 2013; Ruitenberg et al. 2016), and the researchers learning about how they themselves contribute to the 'small culture formation on the go' of the interview event (Amadasi and Holliday 2018).

We believe it is fairly well established that interpretation begins to some degree even at the data generation stage. However, in the postpositivist paradigm there is a danger that the transcripts of what the research participants say is the only focus of evidence for what is going on, and that different extracts are used to triangulate a sense of 'objective' truth about who they are and what they believe. The postmodern interpretation is instead able to extend this focus to the totality of what was going on between the researcher and the people they are researching, giving attention to the way in which their intersubjectively co-constructed text integrates with how they each position themselves in the research event.

Emphasis on truth-checking triangulation is thus replaced by thick description in which we learn from how the intercultural text emerges from a juxtaposition of instances that build up a picture of the politics of this positioning. This enables interpretation to look beneath the surface of the informational content of what people say. Working within the postmodern paradigm, there is no process of interpretation which is value-neutral, and no interpretation of text which can evacuate the position of the researcher.

CONCLUSION: RESEARCHING INTERSUBJECTIVELY

This article has argued the putting aside of several prescriptions that we suggest are embedded in the postpositivist paradigm. These prescriptions begin with the notion of the large national or ethic culture; but they also include a mastery of research methods that serve external, neoliberal professional and institutional needs but which, in their rejection of engaging with intersubjectivity, return to the solidity of culture as the default starting position. Solid culture and solid method is therefore a two-way postpositivist relationship

that is hard to break. In contrast, we argue that the postmodern paradigm begins with the intersubjective relationship between the people being researched and the researcher and therefore opens up the ability to see the liquid nature of the intercultural that cuts across imagined solid culture boundaries. To conclude, we propose three principles of intercultural research which could usefully be referred to by applied linguists in order to resist the postpositivist recidivist tendencies which we have identified as emerging in intercultural research, and to recover its necessarily intersubjective character.

1. The phenomenon of nationality, or any other 'solid' form of social grouping, should not be posited as an a priori category in intercultural research. **[page 14 ends here]** However, nationality, along with any other grouping, should be acknowledged if it emerges as a category which is constituted intersubjectively in the interaction between the researcher and the research participants.
2. Research methods should not be combined formulaically either for the purpose of meeting external professional and institutional requirements or for the purpose of generalisability or triangulation. Rather, research methods should be combined selectively only if required in an engaged response to the emergent conditions of the research context. These methods should be governed by the rigour implicit in constructivist postmodern principles.
3. Where the research interview is used, the interaction that takes place should be treated as text – a text in which meaning, in keeping with the precepts of applied linguistics, is co-constructed between the researcher and the research participants. Thus the research interview does not yield a transparent, monological lens into the 'truth' of the research participant, but rather is constitutive of the intersubjective meanings which are dialogically co-constructed within the site of the research encounter.

By adopting these three principles, we suggest that applied linguists can continue to progress intercultural research within the postmodern understanding of 'liquid' culture, first imagined by Zygmunt Bauman (2000), and so aptly reprised by Fred Dervin (2011). When researching culture(s) and the intercultural, applied linguists can thus also avoid back-sliding into essentialism and neo-racism.

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