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## Block and thread intercultural narratives and positioning: conversations with newly arrived postgraduate students

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The original page numbers are marked in red

**ABSTRACT** This paper considers how, in the process of positioning that is implicit in every interaction, all of us employ multiple and often competing narratives when we talk about cultural identity and our relationships with new cultural environments. In interviews with newly arrived postgraduate students about their experience of travelling to study abroad, the students employ competing block and thread narratives. Block narratives represent an essentialist discourse of culture. As such, they are easily converted into cultural prejudice by blocking the possibility for understanding and sharing at the point of tolerating an Other who can never be like 'us'. These are default narratives because of the way in which we are brought up in our societies within a global positioning and politics. Thread narratives instead support a critical cosmopolitan discourse of cultural travel and shared meanings across structural boundaries that act against cultural prejudice. Threads need to be nurtured as alternative forms of engagement. Therefore, there is a place for the researchers to intervene with their own thread narratives. This intervention is both allowed within and supported by an understanding that researchers join with their participants in the creative intercultural events of the interview.

Nel processo di posizionamento che è implicito in ogni interazione, ognuno di noi impiega narrazioni molteplici e contrastanti per trattare i temi della diversità culturale e del rapporto con nuovi contesti culturali. In interviste realizzate con studenti che si sono spostati all'estero per gli studi post-

laurea, questi ultimi utilizzano narrazioni contrastanti, che definiamo blocks e threads. Le narrazioni blocks rappresentano un discorso essenzialista della cultura. In quanto tali, possono essere facilmente convertite in pregiudizio culturale, limitando la possibilità di comprensione e condivisione alla tolleranza di un 'Altro' che non potrà mai essere come 'Noi'. Queste narrazioni sono prestabilite dal modo in cui veniamo educati nelle nostre società e in relazione alla politica e al posizionamento globale. La narrazione thread invece sostiene il discorso del cosmopolitismo critico, l'idea del viaggio culturale e di una condivisione di significati che travalica i confini strutturali contrastando il pregiudizio culturale. I 'fili' che questo tipo di narrazioni promuovono necessitano di essere alimentati come forme alternative di impegno interazionale. Pertanto, c'è un [Page 1 ends here] margine di intervento per i ricercatori attraverso la promozione di narrazioni di questo tipo. Questo intervento si inserisce, alimentandola contemporaneamente, in una prospettiva entro cui il ricercatore è, insieme ai partecipanti, parte attiva negli eventi di creatività interculturale dell'intervista.

This paper reports an aspect of two one-hour interviews with two postgraduate students who had recently arrived to study at university in another country. We aim to show that the interview event represents a social microcosm in which intercultural creativity is a discursive co-construction in which the researchers and the students are active in the production and reproduction of narratives. On the one hand, we are interested in how culture is an everyday constructive process for negotiating 'the rules and identities necessary for being with people and getting on with things' (Holliday, 2016b, p. 3). On the other hand, we focus on how stories about culture and cultural identity can be multiple and competing depending on how people position themselves in interaction, sometimes creating essentialist blocks and at other times drawing non-essentialist threads.

The interviews were part of a larger piece of research in which five students were interviewed to explore their experience of travel to unfamiliar cultural domains. In the process of considering the nature of positioning that is implicit in every interaction, we address a number of issues. We explore how cultural identity can be dynamic and co-constructed, thus avoiding the more essentialist 'us' and 'them' binary. On a linguistic level, we look at the way in which conversational turns display shifts in narrative. We also reflect on the positioning of the researchers in the research setting and on how their interventions implicate them in these narrative shifts.

The study therefore serves to confirm the definition of the intercultural as being between people no matter what their backgrounds as part of what Holliday (2013) has referred to as small culture formation. This drives us further away from the view-point that might have been in our minds when we began the research - the still lingering narrative of Other versus Western culture, the questioning of which continued again and

again throughout the study. We do not therefore name the students' country or religion to which they refer both to protect their identity and because to do so would be a distraction from the core focus, and, we feel, would not add anything to the analysis. This is less about students travelling to study abroad, than about the participants in the interview in intercultural negotiation as part of everyday small culture formation on the go. We do, however, appreciate the conceptual difficulty here. While concealing the students' country of origin, we do acknowledge a sense of Western-non-Western conflict both in the data and in our own agenda as stated in the next section, where we also say something about the British and Italian Englishes of we two researchers.

We begin by describing the research approach, moving from interview methodology to theoretical perspectives surrounding positioning, narratives and blocks and threads. This is followed by a discussion of the data, how it was selected and what is learnt from it. **[Page 2 ends here]**

## Methodological approach

The research employs a qualitative methodology which follows a postmodern and social constructivist framework. This recognises that researchers are an active part of the social world that they investigate (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 15), and that interviews are sites where researchers and the participants in their projects jointly co-construct meaning and make sense of the world (e.g. Block, 2000; Miller, 2011). A powerful implication of this is that the researchers themselves 'cannot, in a sense, write stories of others without reflecting' their 'own histories, social and cultural locations as well as subjectivities and values' (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 5), and that the interview is itself 'a potentially creative space between people' (p. 114), in which the researchers are deeply implicated. For this reason, we use the term 'participant' to refer to all the people taking part in the interview, including the researchers. The questions the researchers ask are therefore not objectivist information gathering tools that keep them at a methodological distance from the people they study. Rather, they are instruments to help mould a conversation so that meanings might begin to emerge - but, importantly, in such a way that the people they study can also produce meanings that are unexpected and not dominated by the researchers.

The 'creative space' that interviews bring about can influence not only the choice of what is said but also how it is rationalised. In a one-hour interview with Sara about her professional cultural trajectory since coming from Iran to Britain at the age of 14, Holliday (2012) argued that his own intervention was admissible because it led to understandings that he did not previously imagine and that emerged as highly meaningful to her. He claimed that Sara's particular trajectory from one cultural domain to another contributed to a successful professional life. While Sara responded to interviewer prompts, what she chose to say was not 'fed' by 'leading questions'; but Holliday felt he needed to help her to see qualities within her personal trajectory that she might not have thought about before. Holliday had a clear agenda to reveal cultural strategies that Sara herself might not previously have rationalised quite as she did in the interview.

Similarly, Amadasi (2014, p. 145) 'steps in' to encourage teenage children with migration backgrounds to show their 'expert' transnational experience. Like Holliday, Amadasi has a conviction that this expert ability is there to be revealed, and that not to prompt it would not be fulfilling the role of a critical researcher.

The agenda that researchers bring to the interview is therefore a moral one to reveal the hidden. It is a humanistic agenda, influenced by a non-essentialist critical cosmopolitan discourse of culture, that recognises the positive contribution of prior cultural experience that has previously been marginalised by Western constructs of a culturally deficient non-Western Other (Beck & Sznaider, 2006; Delanty, Wodak, & Jones, 2008; Holliday, 2013). It is therefore by looking at what has hitherto been hidden at the margins that we can begin to appreciate deeper cultural realities that can transcend the structural boundaries of nation and the global order (Hall, 1991, p. 53). Such an interventionist agenda both requires immense caution and reflexivity on the part of researchers, and a recognition of the need to unpick competing narratives and discourses of culture. The next section will describe how we practised caution and reflexivity in the setting and orientation of the research. Then, the treatment of data section will describe how we used linguistic analysis to unpick competing narratives and discourses.

[Page 3 ends here]

## Setting and orientation

The setting was the university office of one of the researchers (R2) with the other researcher (R1) on Skype. Despite the constraints of the Skype arrangements, the setting was intended to be informal, with researchers and students sitting in a circle with three chairs and the computer screen on the desk nearby.

The interviews took place in this format as a result of a fairly lengthy negotiation with the larger student group, who were all of the same nationality. Seven of them had responded to an invitation to attend two focus group meetings that were unrecorded; and it was several of the students who attended these who requested that they preferred to be interviewed individually. There was some evidence in email correspondence that several of the students felt uncomfortable speaking in front of the others. An initial open invitation for them to sign up to a range of possible dates and times was unsuccessful, and followed by some students requesting to be assigned specific appointments. In two cases, as with the second interview reported in this paper, the students chose to come to the interviews in pairs. We therefore had the initial impression of a strong sense of agency with which the students came to the interviews that we later felt underpinned the atmosphere of shared sense-making in the interviews.

Once the interviews began it became evident that we two researchers with the student, and in one case two students, were each bringing our own personal cultural trajectory into the conversation. We hope that the data will show that our own trajectories lead us to express our own views, along with the students. This is the basis of genuine threads that we are extending to the students. In other words, we often find

ourselves introducing topics not for the instrumental purpose of developing interview but because we really do have views which connect with those of the students.

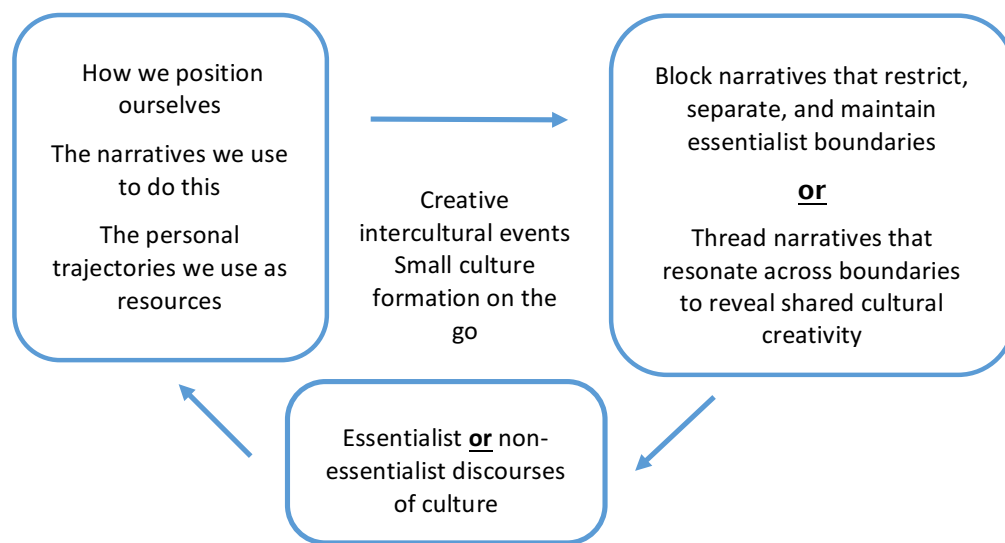
It is also significant that we two researchers and the students each bring our own Englishes to the interviews, each with their own linguaculture. Linguaculture can be defined as elements of linguistic cultural experience that can be carried from one language to another (Risager, 2011, p. 110). In the case of the two interviews in this study, the two students each brought two or three other languages, and one of the researchers brought Italian into the English that acts as the lingua franca of the interview. Although R2 would normally be labelled as a 'native speaker' and therefore considered to be an 'ideal user of English', in this setting he is not able to rely easily on the tacit interpretations that come from his particular English language history (Holliday, 2015). This has the positive impact of pushing him into a degree of wrong-footedness that forces the core ethnographic discipline of making of the familiar strange. The counter construction of all participants as equally different types of users of English helps to reinforce the small culture of hesitant multiple cultural sharing that is the intended core of the interview process.

This involvement of we researchers as cultural actors bringing our own trajectories is in itself a subject for ethnographic study, as we are reminded of by Clifford, when he notes that data is not the result of 'an orderly process of collecting or recording but as an improvisation in the midst of competing, distracting messages and influences' (1990, p. 54). It is therefore a natural extension of this type of research that this paper aims to find out what sense all the participants are themselves making of the interview. **[Page 4 ends here]**

## Conceptualising creative intercultural negotiation

As a site of creative intercultural negotiation, we conceptualise the interview as an example of small culture formation on the go, by which we mean a momentary coming together of a small group of people from diverse cultural backgrounds working out rules for engagement (Holliday, 2016b). This is a domain of action that we all share across structural boundaries and which contains the base elements of the intercultural. It informs our decision not to name the country of origin of the students, and also counters methodological nationalism, the long-standing preoccupation with the national which is critiqued within the critical cosmopolitan discourse (Beck & Sznaider, 2006, p. 2).

This small culture negotiation will be looked at by means of a collection of interrelated concepts that are presented in Figure 1. The concepts clustered at the top left of the figure are taken from theories of positioning and narratives and from Holliday's (2013) grammar of culture. They come together in positioning events within the interviews, with an outcome of either blocks or threads. We will now explain more about these concepts and how they fit together.



**Figure 1: Elements of creative intercultural negotiation**

### Narratives, positioning and personal trajectories

Narratives and positioning theory are helpful in making sense of the interviews in this study because we see that both the researchers and students introduce different narratives at different times to position themselves.

Positioning relates to communicative events in which speakers take up, reject, confirm or negotiate fluid positions (Amadasi, 2016; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999, pp. 19-20). These events are relational and mutually independent. By positioning themselves speakers also invoke positionings for their interlocutors (Baraldi, 2009a, p. 6) who can confirm or reject them. Positioning is therefore social in the sense that the discursive constructions of personal stories are legitimated and explained through and inside a more complex network of personal and collective narratives. In this sense, positioning is often achieved by employing narratives. **[Page 5 ends here]**

Narratives are constructed from events in time and space to create causal employment (Baker, 2006; Baraldi, 2009b, p. 5; Somers, 1994, p. 616). They can range from grand-historical (e.g. clever democracies fighting evil empires with stories of ancient battles) to small and personal (e.g. always being fair and considerate, with stories of life events). They can be spoken by the media, political parties and institutions, or by individuals; and individuals can relate them either to political and higher moral contingencies or to personal views about themselves and other people. Narratives can be highly designed or loosely structured, employing a range of stories. To look at narratives means therefore to focus on how people construct the events they observe and their meanings in relation to the temporal and spatial dimension of other events. Narratives thus imply a configuration or a social network of relationships which is constructed and composed of symbolic, institutional and material practices (Somers, 1994).

Narratives and positioning are not in fact merely creations of single social events. Each conversation has and reflects structured forms and pre-existing narrative patterns which are shared as a common repertoire. Narratives are generated by a range of possibilities that a particular set of contextual circumstances make available to participants. In this sense they relate to the third domain on the left of the figure, personal trajectories.

Personal cultural trajectories is a domain in Holliday's grammar of culture (2013, p. 3). It operates as an individualised bridge of negotiation between the national structures within which we are brought up, such as government, media, and education, and the underlying universal processes of engaging with and constructing culture that we all share (Holliday, 2011, pp. 54-55). National structures and how they politically position us in the world are a major resource for the grand-historical narratives, as can be seen in the prime example of Orientalism (Holliday, 2013, pp. 79-99). Our personal trajectories are a major resource for how we manipulate these narratives and construct our own at a more personal level.

Therefore, starting at the top left of the figure, the twine of narratives and positioning is visible in the ongoing switches and movements to and from different and sometime opposite constructions in everyday intercultural creativity. In the interviews reported in this study, we as researchers and the students are mutually involved in this process as we each make sense of each other's narratives and positions and work to establish our own.

### Blocks, threads and discourses

The positions each of the interactants take, the narratives they employ, and how they are responded to, lead, significantly in these instances, to two types of outcomes, blocks or threads represented on the right of the figure (Holliday, 2016a). Blocking and threading in a sense become defining features of narratives in their effect on the presentation of cultural identity. The block narrative of cultural difference promotes the idea of national cultures as the prime, defining and confining units of cultural identity. It builds boundaries and restricts cultural travel. The thread narrative of cultural differences instead focuses attention on diverse aspects of our pasts that mingle with the experiences that we find and the threads of the people that we meet. It has the power to extend and carry us across the boundaries that are encouraged by cultural blocks.

Block and thread narratives represent essentialist and non-essentialist discourses of culture, respectively. This takes us into the domain at the bottom of Figure 1 which is [Page 6 ends here] separated out because discourses, unlike narratives, are highly structured systems of thinking about culture and work to support separate ideologies (Hall, 1996, p. 201, citing Foucault). This is the final stage, in the figure before feeding again into what has to be an ongoing cycle. The thread mode in particular promotes the critical cosmopolitan discourse of culture referred to earlier in the paper.

A key ingredient of the moral imperative stated in the introduction is our interest in wishing to support and encourage the thread mode and the critical cosmopolitan dis-



course that it carries with it. The sources of the threads are clearly there where they appear; but because they represent a promise of finding common sources of humanity that bring us together, they combat the essentialist cultural prejudices that underpin the religious and ideological global conflicts that beleaguer the late modern world. At a different level, threads are at the core of the co-constructed and creative nature of the interview that is appreciated in our research approach. It can even be said that it is the potential of threads that enable the interview to be the sort of event that we wish to research. It is also, however, the case that the block mode of talking about culture conceals the deeper humanity that the interview wishes to reveal. Looking for threads therefore becomes our major narrative. In this sense, 'the medium' of the interview 'is the message', to use Macluhan's (1964) expression.

Threads provide us with the basis to engage creatively with culture wherever we find it and with each other wherever we find ourselves, and that enables cultural travellers to be resilient and activist global adventurers (Caruana, 2014). And we may in this way begin to see that we can have something to offer, to contribute in the different place where we find ourselves, and perhaps find understandings there that we can apply back to where we come from. The ability of individuals to be creative in the way in which they construct and manage threads of cultural experience supports the social action theory of society which argues that we all have the potential to negotiate our personal positions in dialogue with the structures which attempt to constrain us (Weber, 1964). It means that, for example, a visitor from another place has the potential to become a more permanent resident and influence the development of this new cultural domain as a cosmopolitan site by pulling threads and other experiences from other cultural domains for others to interact with.

This is, however, far from a straightforward quest as threads are by no means the default way in which people talk about culture. This may be because the concept of threads is more difficult to conceptualise than blocks in that threads work with complex shades, layers, personal positioning and contradictions. For people who have been used to the cultural block mode of exchanging facts about different 'cultures', talking about threads might require considerable discipline to think about people as potentially like oneself, with threads to share, rather than as mysterious members of another culture. Finding threads has therefore to be worked at by all parties - hence the interventionist methodology in the interviews referred to above.

## Treatment of the data

The decision was made not to present an analysis around themes that emerged from a coding of the whole data set. This is because it became apparent on reading the data, with strong memory of the experience of the interviews, that a more productive strategy [Page 7 ends here] was to present a series of narrative events. Our criteria for selecting the events were to look for examples of blocks and threads where it was evident that the narratives and positionings contributed to the generation of the blocks and threads.

The events are selected as a result of finding ‘linguistic cues’, whose interactional effects are visible in the positioning of narrator and audience (Wortham, 2000, p. 166). It is through these linguistic cues that it is possible for the researchers analysing a particular communicative event to recognise the interactional positionings going on and thus the blocking or threading effect that a certain narrative has on the interactants.

What is significant in the events that have been selected, which is often the case throughout all the interviews, is that it is one of the students who initiates the thread. This counters what might be a common assumption that it is always the researchers who initiate threads in some sort of opposition to the students by means of some sort of power matrix. It is also noteworthy that whoever is the one to ‘feed’ a thread, does it by introducing new narratives which deconstruct blocks and an essentialist discourse.

The events we present are taken from the two different interviews. The first interview was carried out with one student (S1) while the second one included a second student (S2) and again S1, who was invited by S2 to join her in the interview. This second interview was conducted some days after the one in which S1 was alone; and the interview opened with the researchers clarifying that the same questions previously asked to S1 would now be asked of S2 as well, and that S1 was free to intervene in the discussion at any time. Both students and one researcher are women and one researcher male. We have underlined the words and phrases that signal positionings and related narratives.

A danger with this approach is that we are openly selecting events that suit our analysis. However, with the more traditional thematic analysis, in a paper of this size, that would also be the case. We are adhering to the ethnographic disciplines throughout of being faithful to emergent meanings. In effect, as already suggested above, applying a researcher narrative that is structured around narratives, positioning, trajectories, blocks and threads, is itself a struggle that serves to problematise the traditional researcher position sufficiently at least to begin to allow meanings to emerge. Because we have chosen not to mention the students’ country, language or religion, in the transcripts reference to these details has been replaced by ‘your’ or ‘my’ country, or religion.

We use a range of intuitive conventions to mark significant features of the conversation where they are relevant to our analysis (e.g. ‘-’ for abrupt breaks or stops and ‘(.)’ when the speaker makes a pause). In brackets we insert some useful clarification concerning the interaction (e.g. ‘Not clear’ when the audio was not clear enough to understand a whole sentence), while square brackets are used to indicate an insertion or replacement of the original text. ‘...’ indicates that some of the original words were cut. Words are underlined when they represent linguistic cues that are relevant to our analysis. During the analysis, our own turns as researchers will be referred to in the third person.

### **Block 1: ‘We’ versus ‘them’**

The first event is selected from the interview conducted with S1 alone. In the first minutes S1 was asked by R1 to recount an experience from her particular trajectory that

has particular cultural resonance with her life during her stay abroad. S1 talks about an encounter [Page 8 ends here] with a small child in the street who looked at her and started crying. Soon after this story, S1 focuses on a further specific situation that she considers difficult to face during her stay:

S1: ... and also many things happened in the street, for example, the way of clothing- we don't have the same- we don't want to clothe the same and some behaviours that some people do in the street, that we cannot adapt, we cannot accept them as, I don't know, especially we don't have such things in our culture

R2: do you want to give us an example?

S1: I don't know (.) for example, a boyfriend and girlfriend hugging themselves in the street

R2: oh I see

S1: we cannot accept it in ... [our country]

R2: yes

S1: we cannot do it. Yes

R2: yes

This event presents a blocking narrative of culture where S1 positions herself as part of an exclusive social group by repeatedly using the pronoun 'we'. She justifies her problem with behaviour she has observed in the street not as a personal disagreement due to her own values and beliefs, but rather as something which depends on her cultural ('We don't have such things in our culture') and national ('We cannot accept it in ... [our country]') belonging. Moreover, this strong use of 'we' implies a tacit 'them' that indicates that S1 is defining her cultural identity through a juxtaposition with a cultural Other.

As the event proceeds, the researchers' turns pose questions which aim to bring out the greater depth that they imagine underpins S1's story. In the next extract, R1 intervenes with a question that invites a shift in orientation from the more external 'cultural' to the personal sphere. This intervention is validated by the ease and enthusiasm with which it is taken up by S1:

R1: and in these kind of situations what do you think you have with you that you brought with you from ... [your country] that (.) can help you to to- I don't know, yeah to live these situations to react or just to try to go on?

S1: I deal with each situations in different ways (.) ehm for example if I see things I don't like to see in the street I just turn my face or I just carry on my walk without looking at them and one thing happened to me at the cathedral (.) Ehm a father-

R2: you went with the group?

S1: at that day no, not with the group only me and ... [my male course-mate] and the father in the Cathedral, winking me (laughs)  
 R2: winked?  
 S1: yes (laughs)

S1's answer to R1's question shows an alignment with R1's positioning. Her switch from a 'we' to an 'I' orientation, signals a move to the more personal narrative initiated by R1's frequent use of 'you' as she recounts an anecdote which took place in the Cathedral.

The concept of positioning, representing a dynamic alternative to the more structuralist concept of role, is relevant here because it frames participants as choosing subjects. We therefore focus on the students' possibility of choice in situations that present multiple but also conflicting and contradictory opportunities. We note how all the participants in the interview together assume, reject and negotiate positioning in interaction, and how these actions contribute to the creation of new narratives through a selection of stories of lived experiences to sustain certain positions. **[Page 9 ends here]**

## Block 2: 'His' versus 'my'

In the next event, that continues the story of what happened in the Cathedral, R2 asks S1 a question to clarify whether by using the word 'father' she means a priest. She then goes on with the description of what she experienced:

S1: yes and I was really shocked! What 's this? Oh my God! He's a very religious man and I am ... [from a different religion] and I think he knows many things about ... [my religion] since he is a religious man and he knows that this is not allowed in ... [our religion] and in our culture  
 R2: when you say he winked ehm (.) perhaps he was just being- saying 'hello'  
 S1: ehm  
 R2: or did he wink in a particular way?  
 S1: I don't know, he winked and smiled (laughs)  
 R2: perhaps he was pleased to see you  
 S1: maybe- maybe in his culture (.) yes (.) but my culture no!  
 R2: yes (.) So that could be- is possible that (he's) just misreading what was intended  
 S1: yes (.) because I am from different- or I consider them as extremes he's from a culture- a different culture, a different religious  
 R2: yes  
 S1: and different background

S1 here presents a narrative of misunderstanding and incomprehension about something she was directly involved in. Reference to 'our' religion and 'our culture' continues to

suggest her positioning as part of a specific group and to justify the misunderstanding with a narrative of belonging to two different social groups. There is therefore still visibly a cultural identity definition based on a juxtaposition with a cultural Other. However, the story then moves to a more personal perspective with the use of 'his' and 'my' culture rather than the 'our' used in the previous extract. S1 is therefore describing an event that involved her directly and that brings her to explain the meaning of what happened through the lens of two culturally different blocks. Her three times repetition of 'different' signals these two blocks definitively as distant and irreconcilable cultural worlds.

Compared to the Block 1 event, here the researchers' interventions have a different weight. They are sustaining the narrative of S1 through signals or short responses which indicate comprehension of and support for the participant's narratives, as suggested by Baraldi (2014). They are also presenting to the S1 more elaborated questions aimed to introduce the possibility of alternative connections and therefore to highlight a range of different possibilities both in the positionings that can be taken up and the resulting narratives.

### Thread 1: 'A matter of degree'

The first thread emerges when, referring again to the issue of people hugging in the street, R2 asks S1 about differences within her country:

R2: when you go to the capital do you see things there which also don't fit what you expect or what you would like?

S1: to some extent yeah because (.) the world is changing and-

R2: yes, yes

S1: and (.) for example I am a religious person-

R2: yes [Page 10 ends here]

S1: but doesn't mean the other is ehm- a very religious person like me- they- they are atheist in fact (.) many, many situations like that, but not to the extent-

R2: yes

S1: here, I face it here ...

R2: so, it could be a matter of degree

S1: yes

Two moments are particularly relevant here in giving space to the recognition and narration of multiple personal trajectories which mediate cultural barriers. The first one is when R2 asks S1 the question 'when you go to the capital, do you see things there which also don't fit what you expect or what you would like?' Through this question a deconstruction of the blocks presented in the Block 2 event is suggested by introducing a level of complexity in the difference between major cities and small towns. This question

opens up a series of reflections in S1's turns, for example, in noting the presence of both religious people and 'atheists' everywhere.

The second meaningful moment is where R2 introduces a new narrative that claims that 'it could be a matter of degree'. He refers to his own cultural trajectory to introduce the narrative. He recounts his experience of seeing two young people hugging on a park bench in a large city in a neighbouring country to S1's. While this is not her country, it is enough to question S1's statement that hugging can never happen 'in her culture'. This is followed by an admission of his own ambivalence about hugging in the street in the UK. In effect, this narrative of 'a matter of degree' becomes a thread that S1 then picks up with an explanation that also in her country it is possible to see people hugging and 'catching hands' in the street. R2 then connects it to the narrative of modernity; and S1 introduces the narrative of Facebook, and then of corruptive influence, each building threads that both speakers can share:

S1: in fact- But- it is a matter of degrees as you mentioned before

R2: yeah

S1: eh for example (.) ehm in my city, where I live-

R2: mm, mm

S1: em (.) in the city centre

R2: mm

S1: you- you can find people catching hands-

R2: mm

S1: and walking. But in the village where I live it's forbidden to do that

R2: R1: mm mm.

S1: yes

R2: has this got anything to do with modernity?

S1: yes.

R2: wh- when I say- what do you- what do you mean by modernity?

S1: Er- I mean erm (.) to forgo in a way- or to be- er let me find it, imitation of er of the Western cultures especially through films and cinema.

R2: ok

S1: and Facebook for example or social networks (.) yes, and internet websites.

R2: so modernity is the imitation of Western- so- so modern means Western?

S1: no not to that extent- not this- but what I mean is that er (.) if we come back to the, for example decades- decades ago em (.) they are not law even to- em (.) I don't know for example in marriage (.) the bride cannot see her husband until the day they marry him [Page 11

**ends here]**

R2: yes

S1: but nowadays, due to many developments, technological developments, brought these ideas for example (incomprehensible)- for

examples, in ... [my country] the er (.) Indian films are dominated and er many are trying to- I have my niece, she's imitating the Indians in every single thing she wears like them she ehm dress- dresses like them- stuff stuff like them you know (.) yes this is it and em they try- for example they- she's young and she's not matured enough. She just look or watch film then she went out with her boyfriend trying to imitate that love story

This event therefore presents a meaningful variety of narratives intertwined together. Different threads of personal experiences, views and stories give shape to a new kind of narrative, in which a block narrative represented by a 'we' and 'they' ('imitation of the Western cultures') is contradicted by the complexity that are introduced by the multiple connections between the threads. This complexity is represented both by the expected idea that modernity is an imitation of Western culture and by the dominant presence in S1's country of Indian movies that influence young people. The switch in the conversation from block to thread also implies the acceptance of multiple narrative resources, inter-twined in more or less coherent and creative ways, following positioning needs and opportunities arising in the interaction. One important characteristic of the narratives is that people can creatively develop, re-design, switch and combine them at different times in the same communicative event to meet different contingencies.

Moreover, moving from a block to a thread mode tends to counter pre-conceived notions of pre-existent cultural behaviours, and instead opens up the conversation to a recognition of the complexity of cultural processes. A further example of this appears a few minutes later, where R1 joins in the discussion by introducing a third opinion about hugging in the street. Referring to her own experience as an Italian researcher in the UK, she noticed fewer people hugging in the street than in her own country. She suggests that there might be a higher attention to this behaviour in the UK, and perhaps differentiating the weight of the action on the basis of the age, where one expects this form of affection more from teenagers than from older people.

### Thread 2: talking about principles

In the final event, it is S1 who assumes the positioning of the one who counters blocks by introducing a range of different possibilities. This event comes from the second interview, which was conducted with S2 and S1 together. Here, blocking narratives come more frequently from S2. She introduces a block in response to R2's question, and then S1 counters what she says by opening a thread with alternative possibilities:

R2: so do you think it might be something to do with (.) in ... [your country] ehm when you talk about principles you have- you have a heading for it, you can say this is to do with ... [your religion]?

S2: yes

R2: and you know what that is and you can say this is (.) but here perhaps people don't have this (.) this heading and so they- they- they can 't give it a name

S1: no it's not a matter of ... [our religion] or the principles (not clear)-

S2: excuse me our principles are based on ... [our religion].

S1: yes yes I know that. Our principles are based on ... [our religion] but you may find a ... [member of our religion] without principles? (Whispered) **[Page 12 ends here]**

S2: there are yeah of course

R2: well everywhere you're going to find somebody without principles

S2: yes

S1: so we should not- (.) maybe we should relate the way of dealing with people or- I don't know maybe relate many things to ... [our religion] but- or many principles to ... [our religion] but many other principles you cannot relate to ... [our religion]

S2: yeah yeah

There are two competing narratives. One, presented by S2, is that certain principles of behaviour are exclusive to her religion and exclusive to her country. This is a blocking narrative because it does not acknowledge that these principles can be shared by anyone else. S1 partially breaks this block, through reference to her own trajectory, by introducing a different narrative where, although she agrees that 'our principles are based on our religion', the match between religion and principles is not as exact as S2 is suggesting. That she is whispering the statement that not all members of her religion have principles perhaps indicates that she is herself struggling with this possibility. Her narrative is therefore one of caution; and we may consider that caution in itself, as realised in the reflexivity of the researcher, is an important ingredient of thread narratives. This narrative also brings a thread that connects back with the researchers; and in the following turns R2 asks R1 to recount something from her own trajectory of coming to the UK from Italy.

This question from R2 has the same role as that of the researchers' questions we saw in the previous event - of recognising the intrinsic complexity of social negotiation processes which bring people to engage in meaning construction as well as in their own presentation of self in interaction with the social world. This point is visible in S1's last turn, where she tries to introduce an alternative view to that of S2 - that in dealing with people not all the principles should be related to their religion.

This last example therefore exemplifies how threads counter the essentialist dichotomy created by blocks that fix the nature of culture and cultural differences (Holliday, 2011, p. 6). At the same time, in accordance with a critical cosmopolitan discourse, threads include and conceive incommensurability of cultural diversities in the sphere of communication (Baraldi, 2003), by accepting and promoting the expression of complexity and the ambivalence it may imply, by suspending the flow of ethnocentric and essentialist blocks in the conversations.



## Emerging empirical conceptual domains

We have given an account of how an interview represents a space for creative intercultural negotiation in which not only the responses of the people being interviewed, but also the researchers' interventions, deserve to be studied and investigated as relevant elements in the process of small culture formation. This shifts the focus of the interview about inter-cultural awareness away from the differences between national backgrounds. The focus is instead on how the intercultural is discursively created whenever several people, each with their personal experiences, narrate their stories, thoughts and personal trajectories and position themselves about the intercultural itself.

To analyse this creative intercultural negotiation, we have considered therefore the interplay amongst three different empirical, conceptual domains - contingency, operationality, and discourses of culture. (1) Contingency is the correspondence between [Page 13 ends here] certain positionings and the narratives adopted to sustain them. The emphasis is therefore on the elements of personal choice in a range of possibilities which happen at that specific time in a specific place. In this sense, the small culture formation on the go is always a temporary outcome of people coming from different backgrounds, creating dynamics of engagement and an interaction between them. It must not be forgotten that the two students in the interviews are themselves working out contingencies in the middle of a particularly difficult time. They are not only getting used to living, studying, and worrying about exams in a new country, but also to their fellow students from their own country who are also from diverse backgrounds. We as researchers are also sorting out contingencies to do with the institutions of researching and publishing.

(2) Operationality is where each individual engages in this interactional event, bringing their personal cultural trajectories, and negotiating them in relation to national structures. This becomes visible in the block and thread narratives. We define this domain as 'operational' because it is possible to observe the potential of change that choices of narrative and positioning have on the presentation of cultural identity. Block narratives resort to imagined national cultures and the juxtaposition with a cultural Other for the definition of cultural identity, and restrict cultural travel. However, thread narratives, by focusing and recognising the complexity of cultural negotiation, allow multiple connections and constructions of cultural identity. In line with a critical cosmopolitan discourse, threads promote narrative elements that are able to counter the ethnocentric dichotomies that are generated by cultural blocks.

(3) The discourses of culture that emerge in this study are the blocking essentialist discourse, which is then countered by thread narratives that enable a critical cosmopolitan discourse. These discourses feed the larger ideologies of culture that are embedded in our social structures. The essentialist discourse seems to be the default, as it recurs again and again when talking about culture. Our interview strategy is thus designed to unseat this discourse. At the same time, our researcher reflexivity needs to be wary of the critical cosmopolitan discourse that underpins our own researcher narratives and may itself become an enforcing theme.

By observing and describing the ways contingency, operationality and discourses of culture interact and mutually disrupt one another, we have tried to demonstrate how the concept of the intercultural is itself subject to several meanings. These meanings are generated by all the participants in interaction with each other and becoming part of the outcome of the process of small culture formation on the go. Although the content of the narratives and their connected positionings might be different, this process is something in which every one of us is daily involved, be it with people coming from different and far nations or with our neighbours.

A further core issue that emerges is how to bring important pasts that carry our identities into the present and the future without the constraints of the essentialist cultural blocks that have often been associated with these identities. In other words, how can we capture who we are in changing scenarios without saying 'This is my culture; and I cannot be in any other culture without assimilating or acculturating and therefore losing my initial culture'? It is our main point that the paradigm of being 'my culture' in opposition to or toleration of 'your culture' is actually an inhibitor to the richer parts of our identities, and that another, more creative, critical cosmopolitan picture of culture and identity can be far more helpful. **[Page 14 ends here]**

It is also important to consider how the approach to interviewing represented in this paper allows the students, S1 and S2, to help the researchers, R1 and R2, to appreciate the particular and rich pasts that the students bring to their stay abroad. Once new understandings have been appreciated, the overwhelming responsibility of researchers to search for and establish threads becomes apparent. Implicit in this responsibility is the imperative, not only for how researchers think about the people they are researching, but also for how we all think about each other. We must always begin by believing that the other person can take action, whether it be through speech or silence.

In a world where globalisation is more obvious, every day we find ourselves in the explicitly intercultural. The intercultural has always been with us as we move through diverse settings in everyday life, from school to work, through friendships and relationships. However, this new global arrangement, with its inclination to easier movement of people from one side of the world to the other and new opportunities for narrative blending and emplotment, pushes the researcher to question the more common use of the term 'intercultural'. Researchers need to reflect on their responsibilities regarding how they disseminate ideas about the intercultural.

Throughout the paper there has been reference to the combatting of essentialist blocks by non-essentialist threads that transcend structural boundaries. The emerging critique of essentialism is therefore less to do with an argument for diversity and more to do with the everyday processes through which individuals universally negotiate the intercultural. **[Page 15 ends here]**

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