

'I already have a culture.' Negotiating competing grand and personal narratives in interview conversations with new study abroad arrivals

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In an interview with a postgraduate student about her intercultural experience of recently arriving for study abroad, it was found that the two researchers and the student were engaged in a mutual exploration of cultural identity. The interview events became conversational and took the form of small culture formation on the go in which each participant employed diverse narratives to project, make sense of and negotiate expression of cultural identity. The student shifted between personal narratives drawn from her particular cultural trajectories and splintered from grand narratives of nation and global positioning, between non-essentialist threads and essentialist blocks. The researchers learned from her and intervened to facilitate shifts to non-essentialist threads, drawing on narratives from their own personal cultural trajectories, but sometimes also falling into essentialist blocks splintered from grand narratives. The roles of ideology and competing essentialist and non-essentialist discourses of culture were implicit in these negotiations, as were the personal agency of the student as she responded to the constraining conflicts, structures and hierarchies encountered through the events she spoke about. Rather than providing a picture of intercultural assimilation and integration, interculturality is revealed as a hesitant and searching negotiation, sometimes of vulnerability, wrong-footedness and occasional assault on identity.

In un'intervista con una studentessa laureata, sulla sua esperienza interculturale di studio all'estero, è possibile osservare il coinvolgimento dei due ricercatori, così come dell'intervistata, in una mutua esplorazione dell'identità culturale. L'evento dell'intervista assume un tratto conversazionale, promuovendo la formazione di una small culture in movimento nella quale ogni partecipante impiega differenti narrazioni per proiettare, dare senso e negoziare espressioni di identità culturale. La studentessa si muove tra narrazioni personali modellate sulla base delle sue specifiche traiettorie culturali e scheggate dalle grandi narrazioni relative alla nazione e al posizionamento globale,

tra fili non essenzialisti e blocchi essenzialisti. I ricercatori apprendono da lei e intervengono per facilitare gli spostamenti verso fili non-essenzialisti, utilizzando a loro volta narrazioni provenienti dalle [end of page 241] loro personali traiettorie culturali, ma cadendo talvolta loro stessi in blocchi essenzialisti che hanno la loro origine nelle grandi narrazioni. I ruoli dell'ideologia e dei discorsi essenzialista e non essenzialista relativi alla cultura, in conflitto tra loro, sono impliciti in queste negoziazioni, così come l'agency personale della studentessa che risponde attraverso gli eventi che racconta a elementi vincolanti quali conflitti, strutture e gerarchie. Invece di presentare una fotografia di assimilazione e integrazione interculturale, il presente articolo propone un'idea di intercultura come negoziazione esitante e minuziosa, talvolta caratterizzata da vulnerabilità, passi falsi e occasionali assalti identitari.

In this paper, we explore the narratives that are constructed and shared in an interview with a postgraduate student newly arrived to study abroad. The interview is part of a larger study comprising five interviews to ask students from a particular national origin about the intercultural experiences that they found significant during the first weeks in a new country.

A previous part of this study can be found in Amadasi and Holliday (2017), where we looked at 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 in interviews with two of the students.¹ We were therefore largely concerned with how the students and researchers positioned themselves in the interviews.

In this paper, we develop the study by focusing on the negotiation of personal narratives that grows from this positioning. We present events from one interview with another of the students and focus on how both she (S) and we as researchers (R1 and R2) employ personal and grand narratives to enable us to connect with each other through the search for intercultural threads. We investigate the interplay between these different narratives to reflect further on how they can reproduce both a dominant essentialist and alternative non-essentialist discourses of culture.

The study is framed broadly within the area of studying abroad because this social phenomenon provides a rich environment in which people reflect upon their cultural identity as they confront new areas of experience, especially within recent traditions in interventions on the part of either educators or researchers (Jackson & Oguro, in press). It therefore not only adds to the overall understanding of what happens when people travel to study, but also uses this phenomenon to generate broader understanding of intercultural experience per se. We also provide further evidence of students' autonomy and resilience within the non-essentialist turn which has recently put aside expectations of cultural deficiency among so-called international students (Dervin, 2011); and we demonstrate how a different reading of data, which might otherwise signal cultural confusion, can instead reveal immense competence within shifting identities (Amadasi, 2014).

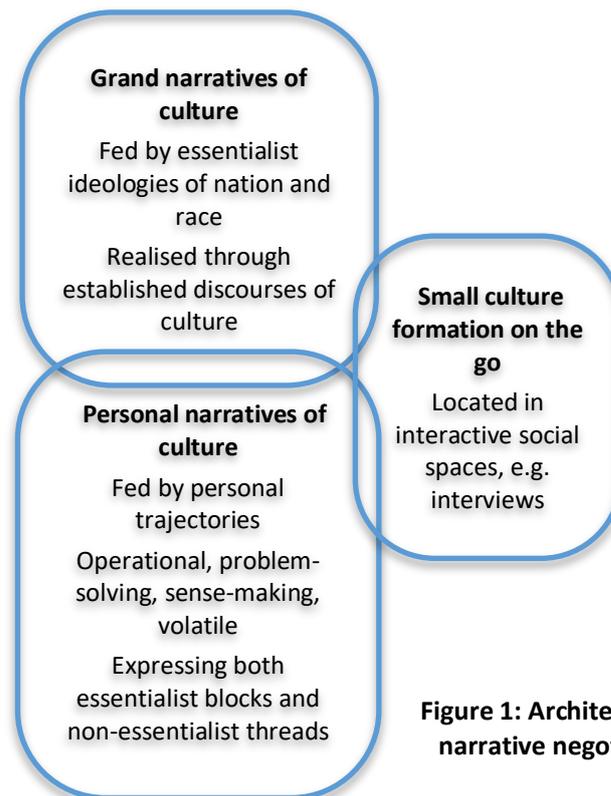


Figure 1: Architecture of narrative negotiation

Narratives as pervasive resources

Figure 1 connects a number of theoretical perspectives to the framework which we will use as a basis for analysing the data. It indicates how people negotiate between grand and [end of page 242] personal narratives as they engage in small culture formation on the go. By narratives, we mean stories that are present in the wider cultural environment that people draw upon in their daily lives (Amadasi & Holliday, 2017, p. 259, citing Somers, and Baker). The agency implicit in this ‘drawing on’ these narratives reflects the social action theory of Max Weber (1964) where, given the circumstances, we can be in creative dialogue with the grand narratives implicit in the social structures of nation and its attendant ideologies and discourses.

Operationally distinguishing grand and personal narratives as ideal types (Weber, 1968) enables us to see how different levels of narrative feed upon each other within a complex mix of creative autonomy, reflexivity and conformity. Grand narratives (top left of the figure) are those that we inherit and are brought up with – the big stories that are designed to define our heritages and to legitimate the social groups we are part of. They are part of the ‘cultural resources’ attached to ‘particular social and political structures’ in Holliday’s (2013) grammar of culture. They are also the basis for Holliday’s ‘global position and politics’ category, through which we inherit the stories of nation and race that position us in relation to the cultural Other. They are ideological in that they contribute to how we structure our thoughts about the world; and indeed, they are promoted by the ideologies of race, gender and culture. While, in the postmodern turn, they may have lost their credibility as [end of page 243] indisputable truths, they live on in the manner in which governments, markets, institutions,

and indeed all social groups and individuals spin, construct and reconstruct their images (Botting, 1995; Goodson, 2006). Even though we may be critical of grand narratives, their residues are persistent and pervasive in different permutations and splinters in the way that we all think about our lives (Lyotard, 1979, p. 22).

Personal narratives, at bottom left of the figure, are those that we form ourselves through everyday experience. In this respect, Holliday (2016b, p. 4) refers to 'personal trajectories', as a core element of his grammar of culture because they mediate and filter how we respond to the structures within which we are brought up. In this process, grand narratives and their ideologies and discourses are part of the wider environment that we interact with; and splinters of grand narratives are irrevocably present in our personal narratives (Kell, 2013; Mannheim, 1936, p. 52). We have varying degrees of awareness of the presence of grand narratives as, through these splinters, we employ aspects of the discourses that express them between the lines of everyday experience (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). In this sense, these personal narratives can be volatile, as they help us make shifting sense, solve the ever-changing daily problems of identity, and sometimes pick up essentialist splinters to express cultural blocks or reach out to others with non-essentialist cultural threads. It is through such discourses that grand narratives are connected to by personal narratives. The overall picture therefore is of complex, multifaceted and shifting realities.

Small culture formation on the go, on the right of the figure, is where actors come together to construct culture on a daily basis. A small culture (Holliday, 2013, p. 3) could range from an established social grouping such as a department, a social club or a family to an event such as a mealtime or a meeting where people come together and negotiate or make culture. 'On the go' implies the possible transient nature of how people engage with the small culture – coming, going, accepting, rejecting, remaking, breaking, passing by and so on. Small culture formation on the go is therefore a set of events in which the personal cultural trajectory arrives and grand and personal narratives are negotiated.

The focus on 'arrives' is significant here because we are concerned with what emerges from these narratives at the moment of interaction rather than with expectations related to the participant's cultural background. Although in the actual event we two researchers do have some knowledge of this background, accompanied by the common assumptions and the prejudices that go with this knowledge, finding ways not to make assumptions about this background when writing increased our engagement with the discipline of making the familiar strange.

It is important to note that small culture formation on the go, while having some commonalities with the notion of communities of practice (Wenger, 2000), is quite different in conceptualisation. Whereas communities of practice might imply some form of development of a functional group, in this study, we are interested in how people manage the intercultural and do not presume that any form of assimilation or integration need to be an assumed objective in this process (Kumaravadivelu, 2007).

In looking at the details of how actors negotiate intercultural identity, there is some resonance in this study with work which is concerned with identity formation and intervention

in interview settings. We learn from other recent studies of intercultural conversations. However, whereas they look specifically at how communicative forms of intercultural learning (Borghetti & Beaven, in press) and forms of interaction (Baraldi, [end of page 244] 2014) are performed, our focus is more on what types of narratives emerge within the broader remit of small culture formation on the go.

Moreover, we do not reveal the nationality of the student or the country of study both to protect identity and because we focus on universal cultural processes rather than the particularities of national identity. In a very small number of places, we have edited the data extracts to maintain this anonymity. This choice does not create limitations within the conceptualisation of narrative that we have so far expressed, as we do not refer to participants' life stories as psychological accounts but rather as stories participants create in response to the particular contextual and interactional resources that they encounter. Our interest in narrative is linked more to how participants present and refer to their own stories rather than to narratives per se.

Interviews as expert exchange

The fact of agency is laced throughout the narratives which people choose, and the small cultures which they form on the go as a matrix of social action. The interview is an event where agency is enacted through choices within a 'socially constituted' set of interactions in which participants can 'make a difference' or 'could have acted differently' (Barker & Galasiński, 2001; Giddens, 1984). Agency here is implied not as personal psychological or behavioural disposition, but as a space where all of us make choices. In the interview, these choices are derived from expertise in intercultural negotiation and sense-making. While the researchers set up the interview with the agenda of researching the students, and are expert in academic research and discussion of intercultural issues, the students are expert in their own intercultural trajectory experience. This is a major factor in why we chose to research them.

Belief in the agency and expertise of the people being interviewed strengthens the licence of the researchers to intervene where it is felt that this expertise needs to be encouraged or supported. Amadasi (2014, p. 145), referred to in the introduction, feels that she needs to 'step in' to encourage teenage children with migration backgrounds to show their 'expert' transnational experience. She 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. Similarly, when interviewing a long-term migrant about her professional cultural trajectory, Holliday (2012) felt that his own intervention was admissible not only because it led to understandings that he did not previously imagine and that emerged as highly meaningful to her, but that they helped the migrant 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 the migrant herself might not previously have rationalised quite as she subsequently did in the interview.

The agenda that researchers of the intercultural bring to the interview is therefore a moral one to reveal the intercultural expertise that those being interviewed bring with them as they engage with small culture formation on the go, which might otherwise be hidden.

Research approach

Our approach follows the postmodern turn in qualitative research which acknowledges the subjective implicatedness of researchers as interactants in the research event (Clifford [\[end of page 245\]](#) & Marcus, 1986; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 15; Holliday, 2016a). Interviews are thus sites where all parties jointly co-construct meaning and make sense of the world (e.g. Block, 2000; Miller, 2011), and 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’ (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 5), and indeed employing them as participants in the research.

This vision of the interview is undeniable, but also particularly relevant to a study of narrative negotiation within small culture formation on the go, of which the interview as ‘a potentially creative space between people’ (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 114) is an excellent example. It is a transient, interactive social space where all parties become momentary members even though some of them may never have done it before. As with any small culture setting, interviews involve diverse role definitions, hierarchies, formalities and informalities, loyalties, variable lines of power and responsibility, and multidirectional senses of duty that can be tacit, blurred and dependent on event. They are, however, particularly apt sites for researching cultural identity because all parties make a conscious attempt to inhabit spaces and construct deliberated narrative statements. S commented later that in the interview, R2 was formal in a different way from usual, and she felt both she and he had to focus in a particular way on what to say.

This perception of the creatively co-constructed interview leads us to depart from the more established presentation of data through themes that emerge from coding. Instead, as with Amadasi and Holliday (2017), we have selected events that we feel best demonstrate the interplay of narratives, especially where the student leads us, the researchers, to contribute our own personal and occasionally grand narratives with our own agendas. They demonstrate how our own knowledge of particular grand narratives enables us both to analyse the data and to take part in the interviews.

Also as already described in Amadasi and Holliday (2017), the setting was the university office in the UK of R2 with R1 on Skype in her home in Italy. Despite the constraints of the Skype arrangements, the setting was intended to be informal, with the researchers and student sitting in a circle with three chairs and the computer screen on the desk nearby. This format resulted from fairly lengthy negotiation with the larger student group. Seven had responded to an invitation to attend two focus group meetings that were unrecorded; and it was several of these students who said 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 was followed by some students requesting to be assigned specific appointments. In two cases, they chose to come to the interviews in pairs. In anticipation of what emerged in the interviews, there was a strong sense of a narrative of agentive and individualist sense-making.

Event 1: strategic holding back

In the first event, S tells us about an argument she has had with her 'host mother'² about breaking her accommodation contract. Here, she describes how she does not reveal her anger during the confrontation but tells us what she was thinking when told that she can 'never be part of this culture': **[end of page 246]**

S: She was all the time saying that 'I am refusing other students because of you'. So she said, 'I've been refusing students all this time because of you; and now you are leaving simply because you don't like the house', and, she said, 'because you are leaving let me tell you that you've been so rude with us. And it was like a shock for me, because in my country, I mean all people who know me, they used to, to I don't know, to give me, to to, cite let's say my behaviour as an example of politeness and being kind and so on. It was like terrible to to think, to thing to hear. And I was like, I kept silent and she started saying a lot of things, and, she said the thing that I really wanted to [incomprehensible] she said, 'you will never be part of this culture'.

R2: Ooh.

S: [laughing] I really wanted to tell her that that who told you that I'm that I want to be a part of this culture. I already have a culture. I don't need to belong. I already belong to a culture. I don't need to belong.

R2: Were you saying this because you were angry with what she was saying?

S: Aah.

R2: She she she is building a barrier. R1: Mmm.

R2: So you're also responding to this barrier.

S's statement suggests a conflict between personal and grand narratives. On the one hand is what seems to be her host mother's grand narrative that foreigners should be 'assimilated' into the 'host' national culture. This can be associated with a dominant, essentialist, West as steward discourse of culture in which so-labelled 'non-Western' people are Othered as needing help to adjust to the individualism and personal responsibility imagined to characterise 'Western culture' (Holliday, 2013, p. 110). This discourse is evident in the host mother's reported assertion that S will 'never be part of this culture' because she wants to leave her accommodation 'simply because' she does not like it. The discourse therefore implies that the host mother thinks that S has not learnt the 'this culture' lesson of being able to engage with and take responsibility for the rules of the accommodation contract because of 'her culture'.

We are not disclosing whether or not S is herself 'non-Western'. Even if she came from a part of the world that is outside Europe, North America and so on, 'Western' or 'non-Western' is less to do with geography and more with subjective narratives of identity that are by no means fixed. Neither do we know if S's interpretation of what happened is correct. This is not important. What is important is that S's account represents a personal narrative of independent resistance in which she does not want to be part of 'this culture' because she already has a culture. This notion of resistance fits an alternative, non-essentialist critical cosmopolitan discourse which maintains that there are marginalised cultural realities that are able to resist the Western imagination of a culturally deficient Other and able to transcend structural boundaries (Beck & Sznaider, 2006; Delanty, Wodak, & Jones, 2008; Holliday, 2013; Rabinow, 1986). Hence, S presents her 'own culture' as competent to deal with the situation in which she finds herself even though marginalised by the host mother. Indeed, it is a major aim of this study to follow the agenda set by Stuart Hall (1991a, p. 34; 1991b, p. 53) to learn from contesting marginalised realities as they claim centre ground. **[end of page 247]**

We therefore read S's use of 'culture' as non-essentialist. It is not used as an essentialist block against her host mother's reported essentialist use of 'culture', but as a point of personal resistance against being categorised as not belonging to it. One might say that she is rising above and walking away from the temptation of a blocking 'my culture, your culture' grand narrative. S is making a personal narrative choice to reject belonging to an essentialist notion of 'British culture'. Her 'own culture' therefore represents a critical cosmopolitan expansion that resonates with the notion of intercultural resilience that Caruana (2014) observes as a significant feature of international university student mobility. This choice also resonates with Amadasi's (2014) already cited description of the transnational competence of children with migration backgrounds in Italian schools dealing with travelling back to their parents' countries.

It is important to acknowledge here that our analysis indeed favours the possibility of narratives which promote the alternative, non-essentialist critical cosmopolitan discourse of culture, and that this preference also influences how we interact with S about the event she is reporting. That we researchers speak this discourse is a major factor in our methodological implicatedness in the interview. It encourages a particular outcome and contributes to the narrative development of the whole interview. This is evident in R2's comment, 'she is building a barrier' and then 'so you're also responding to this barrier', in which he is encouraging S to confirm and rationalise her strategy. It is not possible to know how far S would have continued to talk in this way without this intervention; and one might question whether there is enough evidence to support the interpretation that S is engaging in an act of resistance at all. Significant in our analysis is the fact that we researchers are being led into a level of understanding about the strategic, and unexpectedly non-essentialist nature of 'my culture' which we had not previously fully appreciated. This is where we researchers learn more about the location of our own discourse of culture. While we had, initially, by default located the phrase 'I already have a culture' within an essentialist discourse, we now appreciate that there are times when such a statement can indeed be part of our preferred non-essentialist critical cosmopolitan discourse. Further evidence to support this developing understanding

is provided by the juxtaposition with what happens in the continuation of the event, as S explains why she did not actually say aloud her reported response to the incident, which she connects to another incident in R2's class:

S: Yeah exactly. But I didn't say that actually. I, I thought to say that.

R2: Oh I see; but you didn't say it.

S: No, no. And, you know the thing that that stuck me from saying that, is that, once we did a session with, with you [laughing]. You have been talking about how can we reflect, how can we use our experiences, how can we speak about our experiences in an academic way, through observing what happened around us. And I told you that I'm doing that with my hosts. You said it's a good thing; you can write about them, but don't insult them. Then, directly you said, you wouldn't do that because you are an educated person.

R2: Did I say that? S: Yes. [laughing] R2: Wow. [laughing] **[end of page 248]**

S: I loved the last sentence that, because I'm an educated person, I'm not expected to do a lot of things. You see. And this is the thing that stopped me from.

R2: Did I really say that? [laughing]

S: This is the thing that stopped me. I mean, I was saying to myself, people, whom I consider as examples, like, yourself, as seeing me like, like an educated person, who shouldn't act that way. So I kept silent, and she was saying blah blah blah blah a lot of things, and, when she stopped speaking I told her can I leave [laughing]. She said yes, and, I left the house, simply.

S's reference to her full engagement with the resource of the discussion in the university class further evidences the critical cosmopolitan expansion of her notion of 'I already have a culture'. It indicates social action in her walking away that crosses structural boundaries and transcends and rejects the 'blah, blah, blah' discourse of the perceived blocking grand narrative.

Her resilient use of resources is further evidenced by her calling friends, other study abroad students on her course, one of whom is able to join with her resilient action by getting a taxi to come for her:

R2: So where did you go that time of night?

S: Fortunately I had credit on my mobile phone. I got [my friend ...]; and, she was in the here in the town. She was in the in the restaurant with friends. She took a taxi, and she, she came to, yeah.

The impression here of students who are capable of looking after themselves in a new cultural environment is developed by S then explaining that she deals with this sort of conflict all the time in her own country but that here she is less certain of her resources:

S: Yeah, and I really I, I mean, words, what hurted me most is that, if I, if I were in, if it's happened to me that I, I mean, such accident in my country, I would do, I would do other things. I don't know. For example I may report that to police or something like that. Because I'm not that kind of people that argue on such stuff, but, I cannot let my, let my, I mean, let my rights like this. You see, I used to report this stuff directly. So, the bad thing about it is that I couldn't do anything because I'm not in my country. The thing that I could do is that I reported that to the police.

This shows that her choice to remain silent is based on a strategy of social skills developed from both her prior life experience and her experience of being a student in her new cultural environment. It confirms that the difficulties S faces are not because of an essentialist cultural difference in values, but due to a more practical matter of being in an unfamiliar place where she is unsure of the resources available to her.

In the next sequence, R1 supports this non-essentialist stance by drawing a thread to her own similar experience through a personal narrative of travel ('I can, I am with you because I mean you are abroad so it's very hard to know what to do, yeah.'). However, R1 then quickly moves on, with 'but did you', to ask a question that invites a deeper consideration of cultural difference:

R1: Yes, I can, I am with you because I mean you are abroad so it's very hard to know what to do, yeah. But when you said that that that this this things that she told you about you never be, part of this culture. But did you have some kind of thoughts about this before this event? I mean the way you reacted was something that you were, were you thinking about belonging **[end of page 249]** to a culture even before this, or was this event that made you think about belonging and, in terms of belonging to culture?

Through this question, R1 investigates further the meaning of 'belonging to a culture'. However, by contextualising the question within the thread of her own experience and within shared sense-making, R1 pulls the issue of cultural belonging further away from the essentialist grand narrative of 'my culture' versus 'your culture'.

Again, one might suspect that R1 is leading the interview in drawing a non-essentialist thread about shared experience of travel. However, her intervention builds authentically on the fact that all three of the participants have 'expert' experience of the moods and feelings lived during travelling. Our use of 'authentic' here indicates that there is a shared resonance that both emerges naturally from the conversation and also contributes to our genuine desire to make sense, not only of what S is saying, but of our own life experience. Furthermore, S's thread enables R1 to say what she is saying and to take part in this genuinely shared sense-making.

In this event, we see some of the workings of small culture formation on the go not only of the interview but also of a fragment of how S and the friends that she meets late at night deal with their new environment. In the second event, as she answers R1's question about cultural belonging, we researchers are taken by S into the small culture formation of how she

deals on the go with her relationship with English, and then, in the third event, with her relations with other study abroad students. It is certainly the case that we researchers' own learning from S about the non-essentialist possibilities of 'I already have a culture' within this small culture formation on the go set up the tone of the rest of the interview.

Event 2: claiming ownership

What S says in the following extract might be as a result of the conversation so far; but it may also be the frame of everything she has been talking about. She immediately problematises the notion of cultural identity by suggesting a degree of ownership of at least aspects of English, which is her third language:

S: Alright, so, if, if belonging is to relate to, if to be related to English, I would say that I've already belonged to to the English culture because I've been studying English for five years in university. So, I'd say I belonged to it. But if it is something to, something that we are I mean, we are born in a in an environment in for example in a in a society with a particular language, so I belong to the the, let's say the culture of that language. So, it is not something to, it's not something to achieve or it is not something to to to, I mean you cannot bother yourself to or do efforts to belong somewhere because it's not something you can do.

R2: So when you say you belong to an English culture, what do you mean?

S: [laughing] I don't know, it's a it's like, I know that culture and language are are as as one of my teachers used to say, are two coins, are two faces of the same coin. So, knowing knowing a language, it's a it's like, it's like a channel to discover to be able for example to read about the literature, about the culture of the, of people, and that's [incomprehensible] it's just a matter of knowing about the culture.

There is immediately uncertainty about what S means. When she begins with an association between English and 'English culture', she might possibly be subscribing to the grand narrative that English embodies and indeed governs the essentialist values and **[end of page 250]** behaviours of a particular national or ethnic culture. We might then need to reassess our claim that her 'my culture' opposition with her host mother was not essentialist. This would contradict our developing expectation, by this time in the interview, that she would lean more to the opposing non-essentialist narrative that languages can express whatever cultural reality they are associated with (Saraceni, 2015).

It is, however, the hesitancy and interrogating nature of S's statement ('it's like a channel to discover') that makes us researchers think that she is instead introducing a personal narrative about her own ambivalent relationship with English. Here again, the direction which we researchers take in our contribution to the interview is therefore genuinely influenced by S. R2's question about 'belonging to an English culture' then becomes an open a space for S to reveal more of the complexity of her non-essentialist personal narrative by introducing the

possible multiple meanings that 'belonging' implies. At the same time, this 'channel to discover' connects with the idea that one can own access to 'a culture' through knowledge of its language, literature, art and other cultural artefacts. This resonates with an Indian actor claiming ownership of American and Italian characters that she plays, a British woman claiming French literature as her own (Holliday, 2011, pp. 50, 54), and an Iranian art student claiming European Renaissance art is part of her heritage (Honarbin-Holliday, 2009, p. 77), which can be nothing but uncertain and complex in their reference. The essentialist reading might ask how this is possible because these artefacts are not 'part of their cultures', though, tellingly, only perhaps in the case of the non-Westerner claiming the Western. However, the non-essentialist, critical cosmopolitan notion of the margins claiming the world would imply 'why not?'.

Event 3: further depths

The third event begins with S agreeing with R1's suggestion, learnt from S's own orientation of 'I already have a culture' in the first event, that in the interview so far she has refrained from essentialist over-generalisations about the 'cultures' of the people she has been talking about. This leads S to introduce a new personal narrative about how she is perceived by her peers from her own country because of the ways in which she crosses ethnic boundaries:

S: Yes of course yeah, yeah of course I am against this over-generalisation and as I told you I had many problems during my school years because of generalisation for example I have been living with with X during my middle school years but I feel always looked at like a Y girl for example.³

That this statement is central to her identity is marked by her emphasis that this is who she is ('Yes of course yeah, yeah of course I am against this over-generalisation'). She then pursues this identity statement through an account of her struggle for acceptance by her ethnic group among her fellow study abroad student group:

S: Yeah, yesterday we, I mean even between friends we were like, we were actually we, it was a small party we are trying to get over stress and stuff, and girls from [unclear]. They they they were trying to show the other girls the X girls how, how to dance in a Y way. When it came to me I was trying to show them they didn't give me importance. They were saying you are fake Y.[general laughs]

R2: But was it humour or was it serious? **[end of page 251]**

S: Was with a humour but I believe that this is.

R2: There is something.

S: Yeah, there is something in their minds towards me that I am not a real one just, because I live with X and I speak X language very well and so on [unclear] this ideas are everywhere.

While S makes no particularly essentialist statements about the X and Y communities, she is clearly struggling with the group's reported accusation that 'I am not a real one'. In order

to project her personal narrative of resistance against pure and confined belongings, she hints at an essentialist grand narrative which presents X and Y as two cultures, the difference between which, according to other members of the student group that R2 speaks to on other occasions, is by no means clear cut. The 'general laugh' about 'fake Y' may indeed indicate a degree of playful banter amongst friends in which differences are playfully exaggerated. At the same time, banter among friends may also be a hidden source of denied racism (Wodak, 2008). These observations are not so much an accusation that there is a hidden essentialism in S's account but that for all of us there will be splinters of the grand narrative of essentialist cultural difference coming into play as we work out our personal narratives of identity. It may well be that S's feeling of conflict with the Y community influences the way that she deals with her host mother in Event 1.

As the event develops, R2 draws a thread to connect with S's account by saying that there are often things going on in people's lives that are not visible to others, by recounting how he missed some key points about what was going on between people he worked with for many years in Egypt, and only found out from others many years afterwards. S takes this lead to comment on how her English teacher, who has a lot of background regarding where she comes from, would find it very hard to see the deeper picture:

S: Yeah it happened to me for example these days with my teacher, I mean he can see the the I mean the clear part about my discussion for example about something related with my identity with an X student he can see what happen in general but the the embedded stuff he would never notice that there is a certain, I mean tension in that discussion.

S's reference to her teacher not seeing the 'embedded stuff' is also something that relates to all of us as we engage with others. It is knowing that there will always be embedded stuff that we cannot see which is a major factor acting against essentialist Othering, in that it reveals a level of complexity that may well defy and cut across stereotypical descriptions and categories.

S's reference to being 'not a real' Y raises the question of hybridity, which is often invoked to deal with how we manage different and perhaps conflicting identities when faced with the need to assimilate with a foreign cultural reality, especially with the particular challenges of globalisation. The notion is critiqued by, among others, Kumaravadivelu (2007, p. 5) on the basis that we can remain totally ourselves even when expanding our identities to accommodate new realities. What we see in S's narratives, though, is a sense of ambivalence concerning identity, but not more, we think, than any of us might experience in the 'multiply constructed' nature of our everyday lives (Crawshaw, Callen, & Tusting, 2001, pp. 104–105, citing Bhabha).

This ambivalence about cultural identity is indeed perhaps a natural feature of small culture formation on the go as we all work with hesitancy and uncertainty about how we should be with relation to the groups of people and the structures with which we **[end of page 252]** find ourselves, and how we negotiate the available grand narratives that are available to us, both rejecting and attracted by their easy answers.

Implications

To conclude, in this paper, we have tried to give an account of how the participants, both the student being interviewed and we two researchers, in social events within an interview use narratives as resources in the construction of our identities. Throughout the events, dominant essentialist grand narratives are drawn upon in different ways, not because we participants are particularly drawn to them, but because these narratives help us in moments of acute uncertainty, conflict or assaults on identity. It is as though these narratives are available to be employed as soon as we are wrong-footed and vulnerable at those moments in identity-assaulting arguments, even of the most domestic nature, when we desperately clutch at pivotal points with which to stand our ground. It is then too late when, after cooling down, we claim 'I didn't really mean that'. S significantly practises caution in this respect as she restrains herself from saying aloud what she is thinking as a result of her perception of identity assault by her 'host mother'. Earlier we make the point that we researchers are not as in control of the interview that we have set up as might be imagined. As reported in Amadasi and Holliday (2017, p. 257, citing Risager), an example of our own wrong-footedness is R2 realising that his presumed 'native speaker' English is in the minority as R1 and S each bring their own Englishes enriched by the linguacultures of their other languages. Also, this wrong-footedness strengthens the important ethnographic discipline of making the familiar strange. This is thus not an issue of language proficiency, but rather it concerns people's social ability to negotiate their identity given that all of us, most of the time, have hugely different levels of success in doing this.

In another phase of the part of the study reported in this paper, another student participant leads us researchers into a discussion of the cultural preferences surrounding the wearing of shorts in which we researchers take the major part. While the student employs a personal narrative to make the point that this is a matter of individual choice, we researchers find ourselves caught up in an essentialist grand narrative of gender and dress; and one of us struggles, with a perceived assault on his identity, to convince the other researcher that whether or not to wear shorts is not just a female preoccupation. Another implication is what this reveals about the pervasive nature of the larger dominant grand narratives that surround us.

This use of narratives therefore allows us to reflect on how S and we researchers, R1 and R2, are working to engage with each other by investigating each other's narratives. These narratives are, in turn, not only a product of particular wider circumstances and environments related to the interview, but also resources that each of us bring from the personal cultural trajectories of our lives, and which burst into the interview events. Each one of us participants then operates prudence as we investigate each other's narratives. To do this, we draw again from particular elements of our lives outside the interview, creating some-times an ongoing movement between different and also potentially competing narratives. This ongoing negotiation is the basis for small culture negotiation on the go within the fabric of the interview itself. The shared uncertainties that we participants find ourselves engaged with indeed become the cracks that let in the light of a wider world, as referred to **[end of page 253]** in

Leonard Cohen's famous (1992) song. Of course, 'light' implies a positive; and, as such, it is an authors' duty to come out and declare the positive spin that they place on an exploratory conversation that implies agency rather than a probable descent into essentialist blocks. The agency that comes through as a result of this negotiation provides room for the non-essentialist personal narratives that each of us eventually employ to counter the grand narratives. Indeed, it is, for us researchers, S's particular rendering of 'I already have a culture' that provides the first of such cracks, the light being our renewed understanding of interculturality that we learn from her.

An important methodological implication of this acknowledgement of the importance of wider circumstances and environments is that everything cannot be seen in the moment of interaction. While these wider elements may be hinted at in the moment of interaction, precisely what is hinted at might not be appreciated without looking elsewhere. This 'elsewhere' might be in other places in the larger conversation of the interview, which are only made sense of when the hint is noticed. This noticing might also only result from seeing the overall mode, atmosphere and manner of the conversation. This interconnecting relies on the thick description that takes in field notes written in broader reflection, experience of what is going on at the time, or knowledge or observation of a bigger environment of social, political or ideological forces (Geertz, 1993, p. 6). An example of this is R2 recalling what other members of the student group say about the X and Y ethnic groups, and the strong individualism with which they negotiate taking part in the interviews.

The overall observation is therefore that all parties in the interview are caught in nuances of difference. All our reasons for doing things are conflicted to the extent that we bring out different layers, scripts and aesthetics at different times, and all without interfering with the liberties of others. Also as reported in Amadasi and Holliday (2017, p. 257), the involvement of we researchers as cultural actors bringing our own trajectories is in itself a subject for ethnographic study. That this paper aims to find out in what sense all the participants are themselves making of the interview and hesitantly taking part in small culture formation on the go is therefore a natural extension of the 'orderly process of collecting or recording but as an improvisation in the midst of competing, distracting messages and influences' (Clifford, 1990, p. 54).

Notes

1. Essentialism represents 'people's individual behaviour as entirely defined and constrained by the cultures in which they live so that the stereotype becomes the essence of who they are' (Holliday, 2011, p. 4).
2. 'Host mother' or 'father' are the common terms used by students, usually from other countries, for the female and male proprietors of 'host family' homes in which they are lodging.
3. For the purpose of anonymity, throughout the transcript extracts, we have replaced the names of the two ethnic groups to which S refers with X and Y. **[end of page 254]**

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