

# 1

## Key Discussions

In this book I will present culture and intercultural communication as movable concepts with fluid and negotiable boundaries. While national structures are important and influential in framing our lives, they do not confine or explain some very important aspects of our cultural behaviour. The book will explore the possibility of significant underlying universal processes which provide people from all cultural backgrounds with the potential to dialogue with and transcend national structures, to cross boundaries and contribute to and enrich cultural practices wherever they find them. This cosmopolitan potential may well have always been there; but it is becoming increasingly evident within a globalized world.

There is, however, another side. Theories of culture are also employed by social groups to construct ideological imaginations both of themselves and others. I will argue that this takes place in everyday life and in the academy, and that current common and established theories of culture are ideological in nature. This relationship with ideology is complex, for it may also be argued that constructing imagined theories of culture is an innate part of the way in which to be is at the same time an artefact of their cultural make-up. Investigating the relationship between culture and ideology is therefore not simply to untangle fact from fiction but also to understand more deeply the workings of culture itself.

The concept of discourse is used as an instrument of analysis throughout the book. It is at the level of discourse that individuals are able to negotiate, make sense of and practice culture; and it is within this process that imaginations about culture are generated and ideology is both experienced and manufactured. It is from an interrogation of the discourses of and about culture that the book builds a new 'grammar' of culture and suggests its implications for understanding a cosmopolitan world.

The relationship between ideology and culture cannot, however, be left as an aspect of how culture works. Ideological imaginations of culture very often lead to the demonization of a particular foreign Other. While it is very clear that this Othering happens at all levels of national and international life everywhere in the world, I shall focus on the Western imagination for three reasons. First,

the majority of the established theories of culture within the academy derive from Western sources. Second, the West is the major driving force in current global politics, operating from a position of political, economic and cultural dominance in relation to the rest of the world, and these theories of culture impact on the desire to export 'democracy' and somehow 'improve' the imagined culturally deficient non-West. While people are Othered in all walks of life, the global politics which is dominated by the West permanently positions large parts of the world. Significant here is Kumaravadivelu's (2007b) statement that a major feature of the 20th century was the West defining the rest of the world – a state of affairs which I feel still continues, and which is (has been) embedded in history to the extent that it is very hard to undo.

Third, Western theories of culture also demonstrate a high degree of *denial* of ideology. In the academy there is a powerful emphasis on the scientific neutrality of theories of culture, and in recent years the sub-discipline of intercultural communication has claimed to move away from Othering. In society generally there is the major irony that the West claims a high degree of awareness and understanding. Hence the primary research question which the book seeks to answer – how is it possible that, in such a climate of sensitivity towards people from other cultural backgrounds, there is still such a lack of awareness and understanding?

To address these issues I will adopt a critical cosmopolitan approach in which common perceptions of culture are recognised as being ideological and constructed by political interest. While there will be a postmodern orientation, in appreciating that the many established 'truths' about culture are in fact socially constructed, there will also be an acknowledgement of cultural realism in that there *is* a cultural truth which is hidden by these ideological constructions. This will be supported by empirical investigation involving interviews with 32 informants from a wide range of national locations across the world and with reconstructed ethnographic accounts and evidence from the media and literary fiction. This fits with the critical cosmopolitan view that there are unrecognised cultural realities which have been pushed to the margins by Western definitions, and that it is therefore from the margins that we must learn the real nature of culture (Hall, 1991b).

At a practical level, the success of intercultural communication will not be modelled around awareness of and sensitivity to the essentially different behaviours and values of 'the other culture', but around the employment of the ability to read culture which derives from underlying universal cultural processes.

The discussion of culture and intercultural communication is difficult at all times. The approach taken in this book is further problematized by the insurmountable dangers of falling into the same

trap of overgeneralization and Othering that is being addressed. The terminology – ‘the West’ and ‘the non-West’, ‘Centre’ and ‘Periphery’ – which any discussion of global Othering has to employ, is clumsy and creates a seductive ease which could paper over the complexity that I am trying to represent. It is hoped, however, that the necessary sense of complexity will be rectified in the breadth of examples and issues posed.

In this chapter I will rehearse some of the major themes which underpin a critical discussion of culture. The discussion of essentialism and non-essentialism will be traced back to established theories of national cultural difference and how they have been sustained in current views within the academy. The familiar themes of individualism and collectivism will be critiqued as basic icons of an idealized Self and a demonized Other, to be interrogated further throughout the book. The critical cosmopolitan approach, which recognises the influence of ideology and the marginalization of non-Western cultural realities, will then be introduced to counter these discussions.

Chapter 2 will present the interpretivist methodology for a critical intercultural awareness which supports the critical cosmopolitan approach and enables a non-aligned reading of culture. The concept of critical reading and *categories of cultural action* will be introduced, to form the basis of cultural awareness tasks throughout the book. Chapter 3 will make the first reference to my major data set of interviews and use them to establish a cultural complexity which begins with the individual and presents a cross-cutting dialogue with national structures. This picture of culture will be aligned with the social action theory of Max Weber and set in contrast to the structural-functionalism of Emile Durkheim which has been the basis of established essentialist thinking.

Chapter 4 will look in detail at how the deep narratives of an idealized Western Self have penetrated everyday life and lead to a demonization of a non-Western Other. The strength and sustainability of these narratives as apparently positive, sensitive and ‘helping’ will be located in a liberal multiculturalist ideology which denies the chauvinism implicit in the individualism–collectivism divide and persists in a disbelief of non-Western cultural proficiency. Chapter 5 will present the alternative, Periphery narrative of the non-Western Other struggling to establish visibility against the dominant imagination of the Centre-West. The purpose here will not be to speak for the Periphery, whose arguments are well rehearsed in postcolonialist theory, but to unpick the common narratives of modernity and Westernization which continue to cast the foreign as only able to succeed through learning the values of the West. The basic tenet that one does not have to be Westernized to be modern will be established.

Chapter 6 will pull together observations regarding the nature of culture from previous chapters and in order to construct an alternative grammar of culture which indicates the loose, negotiated relationship between the *particularities* of national structures and cultural resources and the *universality* of small culture formation at a discursive level. Chapter 7 will continue with the notion of discourse in small culture formation and explore how within everyday and professional contexts it can also work to generate cultural disbelief in the foreign Other. The notion of an uncrossable line between Self and Other and the resulting concept of the third space will be critiqued as discursive products of this disbelief.

Chapter 8 will explore the more positive, creative side of small culture formation in order to make sense of the behaviour of cultural newcomers. The discursive strategies which they employ will be explored. The phenomena of silence and withdrawal will be framed as strategies of resistance; and the principle of transferring cultural experience from familiar to unfamiliar settings can enable newcomers to change and enrich the practices which they find. Chapter 9 will conclude with a discussion of the relationship between the imagined and real cultural worlds discussed throughout the book. This will be set within a framework of cultural realism in which the social construction of culture is related to a false consciousness.

The rest of this chapter will introduce some basic concepts that structure this discussion and indicate issues which will be developed in the rest of the book.

## Essentialism

I shall begin with essentialism because it is commonly felt to be a bad thing, and yet, as I shall argue, continues to sit at the centre of common perceptions of culture both in the academy and in everyday life. Essentialism presents 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.<sup>1</sup>

The most common aspects of essentialism are listed on the left of Table 1, and are to do with separate cultures as physical territories. Much of this essentialism will seem natural and normal because it is in many ways the default way of thinking about how we are different from each other. There is, however, only a short, easy distance from this apparently objective essentialist thinking to chauvinistic statements such as 'in Middle Eastern culture there is no concept of individualized critical thinking'. As I shall demonstrate later, this statement carries a moralistic judgement because of the positive status given to 'individualized critical thinking' in the mind

of the speaker. This statement *Others* Middle Eastern people in the sense that they are lumped together as though all the same under a grossly simplistic, exaggerated and homogenous, imagined, single culture. In Chapter 4 I shall explore in detail the indelible manner in which such Othering persists from an excuse for colonizing foreign societies into the present day. The discourse of Othering is so powerful that anyone who does not fit the essentialist definition is thought to be not a 'real' Chinese, Arab, Muslim or whatever; and in the case of non-Western cultures it is thought that they must be 'westernized' to have left their true nature behind. The serious implication here is that people are not allowed to step outside their designated cultural places.

**Table 1 Essentialism and non-essentialism**

Essentialist view of culture	Non-essentialist view of culture
A physical place with evenly spread traits and membership	A social force which is evident where it is significant
Associated with a country and a language	Complex, with difficult to pin down characteristics
Has an onion skin relationship with larger continental, religious, ethnic or racial cultures, and smaller sub-cultures	Can relate to any type or size of group for any period of time, and can be characterized by a discourse as much as by a language
Mutually exclusive with other national cultures. People in one culture are essentially different from people in another	Can flow, change, intermingle, cut across and through each other, regardless of national frontiers, and have blurred boundaries

**What people say**

'I visited three cultures while on holiday. They were Spain, Morocco and Tunisia.'

'There was something culturally different about each of the countries I visited.'

'When crossing from Japanese culture to Chinese culture ...', 'People from Egypt cannot ... when they arrive in French culture'

'There is evidence of a more homogenous culture of food in ... than in ....', 'Private secondary schools in ... tend to have a more evident culture of sport than state secondary schools in ...'

'The culture of ... in some businesses in ... is changing.' 'The rapid influx of immigrants from ... is having an impact on the work culture in the high street.'

Source: adapted from Holliday et al. (2010: 3).

Whereas essentialism, on the left of Table 1, claims certainty about what sort of people can be found where, non-essentialism, on the right of the table, presents a more complex picture which is less

easy to talk about. The statements are more cautious and shrink from pinning down the nature of individual cultures. There are serious disciplines implicit in these restrained statements which I shall look at in detail in Chapter 2.

## Neo-essentialism

While appreciating the artificiality of such dichotomies, and that there will be many positions in between and crossovers, I am going to base the discussions in this book around two basic paradigms – *neo-essentialism* and *critical cosmopolitanism*. I use the term neo-essentialism to refer to the dominant approach within the sub-discipline of intercultural communication studies which follows the essentialist and highly influential work of theorists such as Hofstede while claiming a more liberal, non-essentialist vision. Critical cosmopolitanism is an established movement within sociology which I shall describe below. I will first briefly critique the work of Hofstede, and then demonstrate how neo-essentialism has developed from the type of thinking which he promotes.

## The Hofstedian legacy

While the problems with essentialism are generally accepted, the temptation to be essentialist is quite deeply rooted in a long-standing desire to ‘fix’ the nature of culture and cultural difference. A particularly influential example is in the work of Hofstede. Based on data from IBM subsidiaries in 72 countries in 1968 and 1972 (Hofstede, 2001: x), Hofstede’s model presents culture ‘as a collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another’ (ibid.: 9). Hofstede does acknowledge the dangers of ethnocentric stereotypes such as ‘all Dutch people are honest’ (ibid.: 14) and recognizes that a culture can be ‘any human collectivity or category: a profession, an age group, an entire gender, or a family’ (ibid.: 10). Nevertheless there is a tight comparison between national cultures as complete and self-sufficient social systems (ibid.). Each system governs the way in which the behaviour of individuals can be ‘scored’ within ‘dimensions’ such as power–distance, uncertainty–avoidance, individualism–collectivism, masculinity–femininity and long-term–short-term orientation (ibid.: 29).<sup>2</sup>

Despite sustained criticism of Hofstede’s now ageing oversimplification of complex realities,<sup>3</sup> the systematic nature of his work

has sustained theory building for more than 25 years, with his basic text going into further editions (2001, 2003). His ‘macro-level laws’ (Hofstede, 2001: 28) have been particularly attractive to intercultural communication theorists and trainers faced with what is considered to be an increase in international interaction during the past 20 years with the advent of globalization.<sup>4</sup> They provide the certainty of precise, tightly measurable behavioural formulae for how to act in the presence of people from specific cultural groups and the reassurance that one can calculate how to greet, for example, a Swedish business man on the basis of prescribed information about ‘Swedish culture’.

## Incomplete rejection of essentialism

Much current work in intercultural communication studies rejects essentialism and cultural overgeneralization and acknowledges cultural diversity. However, this work remains neo-essentialism because important essentialist elements are still maintained. While it does address a rich complexity that goes beyond national categories and deals with the smaller cultures or discourses of business or educational organizations, and so on, the same items of literature are invariably pulled back towards the traditional, essentialist use of national cultures as the basic unit, either employing Hofstedian categories of difference or others like them.<sup>5</sup> Behaviour which goes against national stereotypes is therefore nearly always framed as an exception to the essentialist rule rather than as a reality in its own right.

What I feel is implicit in the inconsistency of such neo-essentialist studies may be described as a *liberal–essentialist duality*. The liberal side of the duality represents Western society’s genuine desire to oppose cultural chauvinism. The essentialist side represents its inability to recognize this cultural chauvinism within its own structure due to an inherent lack of criticality.<sup>6</sup> It may well be that this is a natural state of affairs, where essentialism is necessary for the tribalist survival of any group of people whether or not it has liberal intentions; and this may be the reason why for criticality to be sustained in any society it should not be too radical. This may go far to explain why it is possible to demonstrate political anger but not finally to change anything, for example the lack of subsequent action following massive anti-war demonstrations in London in 2002. The liberal–essentialist duality relates to a well-known critique of multiculturalism which will be described in Chapter 4. It may, however, run further and deeper than generally acknowledged, which is a difficult issue for intellectual elements of

Liberalism		Essentialism	
a) Acceptance of diversity	b) The desire for truth and fairness	c) belief in the neutrality of and the denial of ideology in cultural description	d) Chauvinistic description

**Figure 1** The liberal–essentialist duality  
 Source: Holliday and Aboshiha (2009: 682).

Western society who pride themselves on their critical support of the oppressed.

Figure 1 attempts a dangerously simplistic architecture of the ease with which a liberal intention sits alongside chauvinism. The inconsistency of essentialism, on the right of the figure, as already seen with Hofstede above, enables chauvinistic description [d] to be hidden by the apparent neutrality of description and the denial of ideology [c].<sup>7</sup> By *neutral* I mean a matter of technical fact or science which is therefore presumed devoid of chauvinism. By *ideology* I mean a system of ideas that promote the interests of a particular group of people.<sup>8</sup> (While ideology will be a focus of my discussion throughout, its specific role in culture formation will be discussed in Chapter 6.)

While the liberal ideal might morally dislike this degree of generalization, its desire for truth and fairness [b] feeds well, across a thick but porous line, on ‘neutral’ essentialist description because it needs something solidly different to be fair and truthful about. Diversity is thus accepted [a] as exception to an essentialist rule, distant though this rule might be. Neo-essentialist intercultural studies, as the scientific face of liberalism, also depend on the neutrality of description [c] to build theories about culture.

Shuter (2008: 38) argues that such theories thrive on tightly specialist concepts such as ‘uncertainty reduction’, ‘initial interaction’, ‘intercultural communication competence’, ‘communication apprehension’, ‘intercultural adaptation’ and ‘relationship development’. Kumaravadivelu (2007a: 68) makes a similar point about the proliferation of technical terms such as ‘accommodation, acculturation, adaptation, adoption, assimilation, enculturation, integration’. The need to get involved in such technical detail makes it hard for career academics to break away and address what Hall (1991a) and Hannerz (1991) refer to as the uncomfortable politics of global inequality. The liberal–essentialist duality thus represents a hybridity of critical awarenesses which is weakened by career research imperatives that depend on established scientific



paradigms. Moon (2008: 15) notes the increased interest in tightly defined national cultures during the accountability regime of the Reagan and Thatcher era of the 1980s.

## Individualism and collectivism

The common cultural labels of individualism and collectivism play a particularly powerful role in the neo-essentialist denial of ideology. These are most commonly associated with Triandis' (1995) classic text. They are presented as neutral labels for two 'prototypes' of national culture (Triandis, 2004: ix). While he acknowledges that both prototypes exist to varying degrees in all countries, it is well known in intercultural studies and training that they tend to be located in specific geographical locations. 'People from *individualist cultures*' are presented as 'North Americans of European backgrounds, North and West Europeans, Australians, New Zealanders', who perceive themselves as autonomous and prioritize personal over group goals. They prize linear progression, personal improvement, achievement, assertiveness, self-reliance, consistency, being open to new experiences, having fun and equal distribution of resources. Silence is associated with anger, bad mood, or low competence. Face is personal. They like to have many choices of group membership; and they are good at making new relationships. According to one study, they prefer to ski alone. In contrast, 'people from *collectivist cultures*' are presented as 'Latin Americans, Southern Europeans, East and South Asians, Africans'. They perceive themselves primarily as group members with strong group loyalty and interdependence. They favour group members over outsiders. They prize stability, where norms and obligations do not change. They think in a circular manner. They think that silence is a virtue. Face is derived from the group. They are satisfied with very few choices, are members of few in-groups, with the family as the most important, of which they are members by right of birth or marriage. They find new relationships difficult. A recent study showed that they prefer to ski together (ibid.: x–xi).

However, despite the claim to neutrality, it seems clear that individualism represents imagined positive characteristics, and collectivism represents imagined negative characteristics. Individualism relates precisely to the geographical location associated with the Centre-West. Min-Sun Kim (2005: 108) insists that the collectivism label Others non-Western people as 'barbarians'. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that associating individualism with being consistent, open to new experiences, having fun and self-reliance, and collectivism with circular thinking, being closed to new experiences and deferential

to group tradition, can be anything but the projection of a positively imagined Self on a negatively imagined Other.<sup>9</sup> Evidence that the collectivism description relates more to a generalized notion of low achievement, rather than to specific national cultural groups, is evidenced by the fact that the same descriptions are used of low-achieving mainstream American schoolchildren (Kubota, 2001). Triandis (2006: 29) himself gives away his own association between collectivism and deficiency when he connects it with ‘poverty’, societies with ‘*only* one normative system’ (emphasis added), which are ‘not cosmopolitan’, and with the ‘lower social classes of any society’ or among people who ‘have not travelled’, not ‘been socially mobile’ or who ‘have not been exposed to the modern mass media’.

However, Min-Sun Kim (2005: 109) follows the neo-essentialist paradigm by quickly withdrawing from her attack with a reassessment of how the individualism–collectivism division can still be used as though a neutral set of categories. She may consider her reassessment to be a solution; but, in my view, realigning a concept that has chauvinism implicated within it simply shifts the issue elsewhere.

Far from being a neutral cultural quality, in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s collectivism was associated with totalitarianism, ‘closed societies’ and the political curtailment of the human right of individualism. In *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Karl Popper states that collectivism is a doctrine that emphasizes the power of the collective over the individual (1966: 9, note 1) and inequality (ibid.: 99). It is perceived as an imposed order rather than as a cultural quality. While Popper does associate individualism with ‘Western civilization’ and Christianity, and collectivism with the political ideology of ‘tribalism’ (ibid.: 102) – not to be confused with tribe – he by no means sees this as an exclusive and fixed relationship, making it clear that Christianity imposed collectivism during the Inquisition and has the potential to do so again in the future (ibid.: 104). Similarly, individualism as a political strategy rather than a cultural quality is evident in Stråth’s (2008: 22) observation that the individualist ideal of the liberal European nation state does not extend itself to immigrants from the non-West.

Popper also takes care to distinguish individualism from egoism and collectivism from unselfishness (1966: 100) and makes the point that Plato, in his construction of ‘the Republic’ as a perfect collectivist society, wrongly associates individualism with selfishness (ibid.: 101). We need to take the same sort of care in our use of these terminologies.

What the individualism–collectivism distinction does provide, however, is at least a hint of an imagined division in the minds of those who use it of something approaching a geographical division between

the 'West' and the 'non-West'. These terms have a problematically unclear nature, hovering between geography and psychological concept, to the extent that it is impossible to use them in a logical, consistent manner, while at the same time using them is unavoidable because they are on everyone's lips. I feel I have no choice but to use them throughout the book, albeit in this unsatisfactory manner. There will, however, be an attempt to address them head-on in Chapter 5.

## Cosmopolitanism

Imagining individualism and collectivism to be neutral cultural categories is thus a serious misrepresentation. To find an acknowledgement of the ideological forces that underpin such notions of culture it is necessary to go to the very different paradigm of critical cosmopolitanism. This derives largely from outside intercultural communication studies – from within a broader sociological and anthropological viewpoint. Writers within this movement say that the world is not neatly divided into national categories, but that boundaries are increasingly blurred and negotiable. There is a recognition of the complexity of cultural realities, and of the normality of behaviour which the neo-essentialists would consider exceptions to the rule.<sup>10</sup> There is an image of a vast complex of shifting, overlapping, swirling, combining and splitting discourses and literacies. In one sense this complexity and blurring of boundaries is connected with the advance of globalization and the movement of people. However, while globalization is often cited as a recent phenomenon, one only needs to read Herodotus (1972) to see a picture of 5th-century BC Greece in which cultural artefacts as basic as the gods are traced both in naming and character through a globalized relationship with North Africa and Asia.

There is a recognition that the preoccupation with national culture derives from a *methodological nationalism* that has dominated social science and created an oversimplistic impression of the way in which the world is organized. This stems from a 19th-century vision of European nation states and 'blinds' us to 'the multi-dimensional process of change' (Beck and Sznaider, 2006: 2).<sup>11</sup>

## Global cosmopolitanism

However, not all cosmopolitanism manages to escape from neo-essentialism. Homi Bhabha warns us against a 'global cosmopolitanism'

which imagines a globalized world from a 'nice' Centre-Western perspective:

that configures the planet as a concentric world of national societies extending to global villages. It is a cosmopolitanism of relative prosperity and privilege founded on ideas of progress. ... Global cosmopolitans of this ilk [that] frequently inhabit 'imagined communities' that consist of silicon valleys and software campuses ... call centres ... sweat shops ... readily celebrates a world of plural cultures and peoples located at the periphery, as long as they produce a healthy profit margin. (Bhabha, 1994: xiv)

This Centre-constructed world defines 'proper' social life and is associated with the rhetoric of 'you are with us or against us' (ibid.: xvi) which we are familiar with in recent US foreign policy with regard to the militaristic spear of 'democracy'. Canagarajah (1999: 207–9) suggests that global cosmopolitanism presents an irresponsibly romantic and playful image which ignores inequality and seeks to obliterate the voice of the Periphery.<sup>12</sup>

The terms Centre and Periphery, like 'West' and 'non-West', need to be used with caution. For me Centre and Periphery only make sense as psychological concepts, though they are clearly related to West and non-West which do have a geographical aspect as suggested above. Hannerz (1991) defines the relationship between Centre and Periphery as one of imposing and taking meaning within an unequal global order. This can apply strategically or emotionally to different groups of people, events or attitudes at different times. I will refer to the Centre-West as the economic and political powerhouse of the Centre within its current Western location. I shall explore the concept of the West in some detail in Chapter 5.

## Critical cosmopolitanism

The critical cosmopolitanists therefore insist that Periphery cultural realities should be allowed room to express themselves in resistance to the dominant global cosmopolitan imagination. Homi Bhabha refers to this emergent Periphery voice as a 'vernacular cosmopolitanism which measures global progress from the minoritarian perspective' and which 'begins at home' (1994: xv–xvi). Canagarajah (1999: 207–9) proposes that this Periphery cosmopolitanism 'has always been there in non-Western communities' with villagers dealing easily across small linguistic boundaries; but that it has largely been destroyed by colonial powers that have 'divided

these communities arbitrarily into nation-states for their convenience'. Stuart Hall speaks of a revolution which is already taking place at the margins to reclaim conceptual space in a 'bottom-up' 'de-centred' process of change:

The most profound cultural revolution has come about as a consequence of the ... margins coming into representation ... not just to be placed by the regime of some other, or imperializing eye but to reclaim some form of representation for themselves. ... Marginality has become a powerful space. It is a space of weak power but it is a space of power ... for the discourses of the dominant regimes, have been certainly threatened by this de-centred cultural empowerment of the marginal and the local. (1991a: 34)<sup>13</sup>

This critical cosmopolitan viewpoint thus places the issue of culture firmly within a global political arena. This view is encapsulated within King's edited volume, *Culture, Globalization and the World-System* (1991b), which includes Hall and Hannerz cited earlier in this chapter. The phenomenon of national culture is itself dependent on such forces in different ways in different places. For example, Hall (1991a: 20) suggests that the notion of British national culture is in decline because the old idea of 'English identity' can no longer be tied rigidly to a Protestant ethic due to the influence of 'global mass culture'. This does not, however, belittle the 'reality' of nation as a significant ideological force. Another key text, which I shall draw upon throughout the book, is Delanty et al.s (2008b) *Identity, Belonging and Migration*, which deals with the dominant Western discourses of culture and race.

## Imagined Certainty Versus Acknowledged Complexity

Table 2 summarizes the two paradigms and lists concepts which will be picked up in later chapters. The more traditional and established neo-essentialism is marked by the definitions and certainties which make it so sustainable, while critical cosmopolitanism represents a complexity which is in a process of negotiation at every level within an unequal world which is marked by ideology.

There are some interesting but significant twists in the difference between critical cosmopolitanism and neo-essentialism. Critical cosmopolitanism is *postmodern* in the manner in which it sees ideology in everything and does not accept the stated neutrality of neo-essentialism, which appears *modernist* in its projection of

**Table 2 Images of culture**

	<b>Neo-essentialism</b>	<b>Critical cosmopolitanism</b>
<b>Culture</b>	National culture remains the basic unit Diversity is the exception to the rule	Non-essentialist Acknowledges a fluid complexity with blurred boundaries Diversity is the norm
<b>Approach</b>	Modernist – ideology only exists within the culture that is being described (Chapter 3) Liberal multiculturalism – different but equal national and ethnic cultures (Chapter 4) Cultural relativism – the protection of difference Positivist – <i>a priori</i> neutral cultural characteristics drive the analysis (Chapter 3)	Postmodern – both the subject and the methodology of investigation are ideologically constructed Recognition of deep Centre–Periphery inequality Emergent Periphery cultural realities struggling for recognition Contestation of principles Interpretivist – observation open to emergent, complex realities (Chapter 3)
<b>The world</b>	Global cosmopolitanism – globalization defined by the Centre image of a global political and economic order	Vernacular cosmopolitanism The Periphery claiming the world
<b>Intercultural concerns</b>	'Us' comparing 'our' culture with 'theirs'	All parties looking critically at cultural texts everywhere (Chapter 2)

a neatly organized world with accountable theories of difference. Critical cosmopolitanism thus takes inspiration from Kuhn's (1970) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* which blew apart the modernist illusion that science was neutral. He argues that the development of paradigms in science is influenced by the academic politics and the ideologies of schools of thought. Any statement that a description of culture is neutral and untouched by ideology thus appears naïve.

However, much postmodernism is accused of cultural relativism – the view that because there are no hard realities there is no basis on which to judge one culture to be better or more moral than another. Cultural relativism is ironically the stated position of neo-essentialism – that we should respect other cultures for what they are. An example of this is in the common preoccupation of language educators from the English-speaking West – 'we shouldn't expect *them* to be autonomous like *us*; we should respect *their* culture for not allowing it' (Holliday, 2004a, 2005: 82). However, from a critical cosmopolitanism point of view this is Othering and patronizing – to

deny the foreign Other the possibility of autonomy, which in one way or another is a universal. Critical cosmopolitanism instead requires a 'self-problematization and the discursive examination of all claims', not keeping cultures separate, but 'promoting openness and public contestation', even of religion (Delanty, 2008: 92–3). I take this to mean that, while it is inappropriate to imagine the deficiencies of a whole culture, as is the case in the construction of collectivism, it is healthy to consider the instrumental efficiency or moral implications of a particular cultural practice. In Chapter 2 I will refer to business meetings between British and Chinese colleagues. If the traditional manner of conducting a meeting on *either* side is considered by relevant parties to be counterproductive or discriminatory against members, then this has to be addressed. Keeping From Criticizing a practice because it is 'cultural' can only be patronizing, in assuming that individuals on *either* side are unable to move on from tradition. It needs to be remembered here that there can be complacency and ignorance of underlying prejudice even in practices that are constructed by their participants as 'progressive'. This seemingly harsh imperative of contestation will influence the disciplines in the methodology for intercultural understanding in Chapter 2.

## Summary

The following points have been made:

- It is not possible to fix the nature of particular 'cultures' and then work out how best to help people to communicate between them. Although nations each provide structures which influence us differently, there are underlying cultural abilities that provide us all with the potential to expand and move across boundaries.
- There is a global politics that leads us to imagine that foreign cultures are such that their 'members' are less capable than 'we' are. The task in hand is to recognise individual potential against the deep and often invisible prejudice that such imaginations create.
- It is generally acknowledged that we must not indulge in essentialist Othering. We must not consider people's individual behaviour to be entirely defined and constrained by the cultures in which they live so that the stereotype becomes the essence of who they are.
- While dominant approaches in intercultural studies oppose essentialism, they remain neo-essentialist because they fall back on prescribed national cultural descriptions. These descriptions are seductive because they are convenient for theory building in the academy, and provide accountable solutions in intercultural communication

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training. There is a prevailing liberal-essentialist duality in which liberal attempts at countering pre-*re*judice deny ideology. An example of this is the individualism-collectivism distinction which appears neutral but is in effect chauvinistic.

- A solution is a decentred, critical cosmopolitanism. The Centre-West must withdraw from imposing its own definitions and allow space for the Periphery to express its own cultural realities in its own terms.

## Notes

- 1 Critiques of essentialism are well established (e.g. Dobbin, 1994; Grimshaw, 2007; Holliday, 1999, 2005: 17; Jensen, 2006; Keesing, 1994).
- 2 See also Hall's (e.g. 1976) influential concepts of 'high' and 'low' context cultures, later developed by Trompenaars (e.g. 2007).
- 3 Critiques of Hofstede are well established (e.g. Bond et al., 2000: 52–3; Fleming and Søborg, 2004; Gooderham and Nordhaug, 2004; McSweeney, 2002; Søndergaard, 2004).
- 4 See the following discussions of the increase in attention to intercultural issues: Kramsch (2005: 551), Moon (2008: 11) Pearce (2005: 36) and Reid et al. (2009: 4).
- 5 There are a number of examples of works beginning with anti-essentialist statements and then moving on to use potentially essentialist categories (e.g. Ellis and Moaz, 2006; Gudykunst et al., 2005; Jandt, 2001; M.-S. Kim, 2005; Y.Y. Kim, 2005, 2006; Pearce, 2005; Philipsen et al., 2005; Scollon and Scollon, 2001; Spencer-Oatey and Xing, 2000; Triandis, 2004).
- 6 See the following discussions of the lack of criticality in Western liberalism: Delanty et al. (2008a: 14), Jordan and Weedon (1995) and Y.Y. Kim (2005).
- 7 See also the similar dichotomy between ideology and autonomy (Clark and Ivanič, 1997: 57; Street, 1984).
- 8 Other definitions of ideology include 'a set of ideas put to work in the justification and maintenance of vested interests' (Spears, 1999: 19), 'a system of ideas with powerful sex appeal' (Gellner, 2005: 2) – of course to the people who promote it – and communication which is 'systematically distorted' or 'bent out of shape' to legitimate a dominant political power (Wallace, 2003: 23, citing Eagleton and Habermas).
- 9 See other critiques of the collectivism label (e.g. Kumaravadivelu, 2007a: 15; Moon, 2008: 16).
- 10 There are several examples of claiming diversity to be the norm (e.g. Ahmad and Donnan, 1994; Delanty, 2006; Grande, 2006).



- 11 See discussions of methodological nationalism in critical sociology (Bhabha, 1994; Crane, 1994; Delanty, 2006; Grande, 2006; Schudson, 1994; Tomlinson, 1991) and in applied linguistics (Rajagopalan, 1999).
- 12 See also Centre-defined 'globalism' which claims that 'globalization is about the liberalization and global integration of markets ... is inevitable and irreversible ... benefits everyone ... furthers the democracy of the world ... requires a war on terror' and no power base (Fairclough, 2006: 40).
- 13 See also Stevenson (2003) on critical cosmopolitanism, and Guilherme (2007) on critical cosmopolitan citizenship. Also, Fairclough (2006: 121) describes 'globalization from below' or 'grounded globalizations' whereby local groups oppose Centre discourses and appropriate the networks created by globalization.