



Culture

## The other side of Othering

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Adrian Holliday (*Independence* 42) is correct in asserting that the familiar notions of individualism and collectivism are “prime artifacts” of “an act of Othering.” These are but a pair of several dichotomous cultural constructs (such as high-context/low-context, monochronic/polychronic, freedom/fate, innovation/tradition, equality/hierarchy) that were introduced to draw sharp contrasts between the West and the East. Invariably, the first construct in each of these pairs has been presented as something positive (i.e., “Western”) and the second as something negative (i.e., “Eastern”). These notions are the hallmark of an Orientalist perspective in which, as cultural critic Robert Young (1995, p. 94) points out, “European culture defined itself by placing itself at the top of a scale against which all other societies or groups within a society, were judged.” It is this perspective that has clearly informed the discourse of the field of intercultural communication as developed by Edward Hall, Geert Hofstede and others, and as disseminated by generations of interculturalists. The acute Eurocentric bias of the field of intercultural communication has been acknowledged even by Western scholars (see the papers in the millennium edition of *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 2000).

Two major drawbacks that characterize the work of traditional interculturalists are the Whorfian connection they made between language and culture, and the ethnocentric orientation they adopted towards alien cultures. Their work is understandably replete with cultural stereotypes about the “superior” Self and the “inferior” Other. Unfortunately, the profession of English Language Teaching (ELT) had nowhere to turn but to this flawed sub-discipline in order to draw insights into the cultural profiles of learners of English as a second/foreign language. No wonder, therefore, that the ELT literature is also riddled with stereotypes about non-Western, particularly Asian, students: they do not question authority, they lack critical thinking skills, etc. In short, non-Western students are not culturally equipped to be autonomous learners. Such stereotypes have developed a stubborn quality, and persist in spite of studies that cast serious doubts about them (For more details, see Kumaravadivelu, 2008,

specifically Chapter 4 on cultural stereotypes, and Chapter 11 on intercultural communication).

The persistence of cultural stereotypes appears to be the result of what the postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha (1994) has called *cultural fixity*, a paradoxical mode of representation that “connotes rigidity and an unchanging order...” (p. 66) resulting in “an arrested, fixated form of representation” (p. 75). Such cultural fixity is closely linked to the continuing “global Centre-Periphery divide” that Holliday refers to. The Centre (represented by John in Holliday’s ethnographic narrative) has always defined itself as superior and has, therefore, taken upon itself (as part of the “civilizing mission”) the task of improving the life of the Other, even by force. The Periphery (represented here by Kayvan) has always accepted its lack of “power and privilege” (as a consequence of colonialism and neocolonialism), and has, therefore, declared itself helpless and hapless.

In this context, it is interesting to note how Holliday describes Kayvan’s position: “He is always being defined by others.” Perhaps, there is another, a complementary, way of saying the same: “He is always allowing himself to be defined by others.” Surely, such a reinterpretation bestows on Kayvan a modicum of agency, or a lack of it. That is precisely what I would like to draw attention to. As historian Alvares (1979/1991) has stated, “no ideology legitimizing superiority-inferiority relations is worth its salt unless it wins at least a grudging assent in the minds of those dominated” (p. 187). Thus, members of the dominated group legitimize the characteristics of inferiority attributed to them by the dominating group. In other words, the process of Othering cannot sustain itself for long without a steady supply of oxygen from the practitioners of Self-Othering. It is worth considering whether, for whatever reason, Kayvan has actually failed to exercise his agency.

The question of agency takes on a special importance in the context of the current wave of cultural globalization, which is creating a novel cultural reality along with a global cultural consciousness. We see all around us how the global flows of cultural capital aided by communication revolution are generating an unprecedented level of cultural awareness, leading to renewed, indeed passionate,

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attempts to safeguard the cultural identity of the individual or the nation. We also see how the contemporary realities are changing the very process of identity formation and, with it, the exercise of individual agency (see Kumaravadivelu, 2008, for more details). Sensing a grave threat (real or perceived) to their linguistic, religious and cultural identity, governments and people in several non-Western countries have redoubled their efforts to protect and preserve their heritage. Under these circumstances, it is essential that we develop possibilities for productive pedagogic intervention that is sensitive to the challenges of cultural globalization. A pre-requisite for that is promotion of a meaningful, sustained dialogue that will help us create the necessary global awareness in all of us. I consider Holliday's essay on autonomy and cultural chauvinism a positive step in that direction.

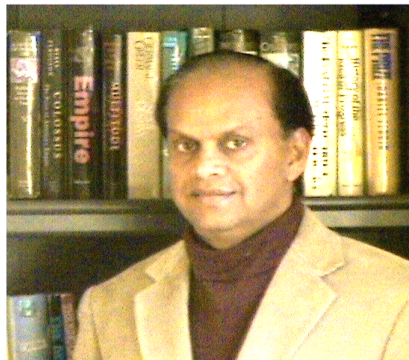
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