

Belonging and interculturality: Opening up the enquiry with arts-based approaches

Presentation for the Futuring Interculturality seminar series, University of Leeds, 11 December 2024.

James Simpson, HKUST

Jessica Bradley, University of Sheffield

[Note: this text comprises James Simpson's contribution]

Introduction

Questions of *belonging*, and indeed *non-belonging*, are central to critical conversations around interculturality and of the boundaries which divide people.

Focusing on belonging enables us to interrogate and rethink traditional intercultural lenses, allowing some kind of *disentanglement* of the intercultural from linguistic, national and cultural boundaries.

Today's discussion of belonging draws on examples from current research in two very different locations and contexts.

The first example questions what it means to belong, for people from South Asian backgrounds in Hong Kong. The *Navigating Belonging* project, running since early last year, has aimed to understand how people in South Asian communities in Hong Kong define, find and negotiate their belonging.

Our second example is of research running from 2022 which explores community and belonging in the post-Covid landscapes for mothers and birthing parents. *Re-Emerge* sought to understand the possibilities and affordances of creative practice for communities which had been particularly isolated during the Covid-19 pandemic in West Yorkshire.

Today we present ways in which these projects enable us to rethink interculturality. We refer to the creative methods and artistic outputs of both examples: digital stories that were devised during the Navigating Belonging Project, and the practices involved in their production, and creative artefacts, including collages, poems and zines for Re-Emerge. In both projects, people worked collectively on individual outputs, thus bringing the individual into dialogue with the collective.

Why belonging?

So: why *belonging*? Belonging has caught the academic imagination. It's a relevant issue for people who are on the move, for transcultural communities, and for times of change and uncertainty. It's emerging as one of the big themes across the humanities and social sciences. But like other associated themes (identity, culture, community) it's difficult to pin down, and there are multiple takes on belonging.

In public and commercial discourse, it's become ingrained. Belonging is a powerful marketing strategy, and the notion of belonging to a brand plays on a human need to belong. Likewise institutions such as universities make huge efforts to generate a sense of belonging.

In political debate belonging is associated with arguments about citizenship, social integration and immigration policy. For newcomers to a country, their belonging, their non-belonging, their no-longer-belonging and their not-yet-belonging are prominent as they navigate, successfully or unsuccessfully, political, public and employment systems, attempting to attain legitimacy as members of society.

Belonging in AL research

Across applied linguistics and sociolinguistics – especially the sociolinguistics of migration and mobility – belonging requires and has attracted a broad focus of attention: as it relates to immigration and citizenship regimes, employment structures, and language education. Sociolinguists tend to recognize belonging as translocal, complex, dynamic and intersectional

What is more, the salience of belonging is not restricted to new arrivals who might 'no longer' or 'not yet' belong – in an official sense – to a nation state. Belonging seems to resonate as a metaphor for everyone who finds themselves in a new or a difficult situation.

Spaces of belonging

In my research in Hong Kong, I consider belonging to be the social and relational dimension of identity. The shorthand and restless definition of belonging that we've developed in our work considers it *a person's expression and experience of identity in relation to affinity with a place, a space, another person or a group*. So as well as becoming a concern in the

sociolinguistics of mobility, it's central to the lived experience of people who are or have been on the move, or who are otherwise navigating interculturality.

People express, represent and enact their belonging interactionally, through multiple means, sometimes but not always including language.

Conditions can be made for the creative exploration of a sense of belonging. Those conditions don't exist outside interaction: rather, they depend on it.

The spaces that are created interactionally for exploring belonging are themselves therefore constitutive of belonging.

Navigating belonging

So the first project is Navigating Belonging: Exploring settlement for South Asians in Hong Kong through narratives and participatory photography.

I worked with two research assistants, Christine Vicera and Michelle Pang, and three student RAs / volunteers: Anish Mishra, Jennifer Li Ge and Ahnaaf Mohamed Lebbai.

Navigating belonging for South Asians in Hong Kong

Some background: South Asians in Hong Kong experience discrimination, unequal access to education, employment, and public services, and barriers to participation in civic activities. The minoritization faced by Hong Kong's South Asians was brought into sharp relief too by the pandemic and by political upheaval in 2019 and 2020.

There is a groundswell of academic interest in South Asians – and especially in South Asian youth – in Hong Kong, in areas allied to belonging, its construction and its navigation. Particular concerns have been their identity as Hong Kongers, the learning and use of Cantonese in relation to identity, the representation of South Asians in the media and online, language-based minoritization in education policy, racial discrimination in general terms, and South Asians' agency to challenge their marginalisation.

An example of the minoritization that Hong Kong's South Asians face is their othering, encapsulated by the racialised category of "Ethnic Minority" or EM, the label widely used – and normalised – for Hong Kong's non-Chinese, non Western residents.

The focus on young people and their education in the literature eclipses the idea that belonging in Hong Kong is an intersectional concern, and indeed one that can be examined through the study of arts practice as well as language.

The Navigating Belonging research asks: (1) How does belonging emerge in and through narrative and photography? (2) How can we develop innovative approaches to researching belonging? and (3) How can our understandings of belonging be used to inform policies, practices and debate on social integration?

Approach and methods

The work is located in the holistic traditions of linguistic, visual and collaborative ethnography. Our approach combines narrative research informed by sociolinguistics and cultural studies, photovoice and digital storytelling.

Participants and settings

Our project ran in three phases of fieldwork, each comprising eight weekly workshops with a different group of participants.

Our first phase was at the Centre for Refugees in Chungking Mansions, Kowloon. *The participants were five clients of the centre, all women who are forced migrants in Hong Kong, from a range of South Asian countries.

*The second phase took place in and around my university, the Hong Kong University of Science & Technology. *The participants were four undergraduate students.

*The participants in the final phase, taking place in a co-working space in Kowloon, were a mixed group of *young people in their final year of high school and older professional people.

Eight research workshops

Each phase followed the same pattern, broadly.

Photovoice and digital storytelling workshops

For the first five sessions we ran Photovoice Workshops. Our participants learned some principles of photography, and took photographs relating to their own belonging, in the workshops themselves, on Photovoice walks in

places in the area, and at home. In the workshops they described and talked about the photographs, and related them to their developing understanding of belonging, in carefully structured but quite informal discussions with the project team.

In the last three weeks, the participants developed Digital Stories based on the photographs and narratives from earlier. These are displayed online on the project website, and comprise the public-facing visual record of the research. (I'll share the link to the Digital Stories later).

We audio-recorded, filmed and photographed the workshops, and recorded interviews with the participants.

Phase 2

To give you a sense of how the research workshops ran, and the data we generated, I'll talk about some of the second phase, and refer to the experience of one of the participants, Sumeet, a third year business and finance undergraduate.

Participants

So there were four participants in phase 2, Sid / Divi / Khalil / and this is Sumeet.

In common with the other phases, the workshops took place over eight sessions, five Photovoice workshops and three Digital Stories workshops.

Data extracts

Here are some extracts from the collaborative talk around the photographs and activities in the first couple of workshops. The speaker in all cases is Sumeet, who you can see there in the middle. Sumeet was born in Hong Kong. Her parents are from Indian Punjab and the family are Sikhs.

Much of Sumeet's talk draws a connection between language, belonging and non-belonging.

She refers to 'locals' by which we assume she means Hong Kongers from a Cantonese linguistic and Chinese cultural and ethnic background.

whenever I like meet any locals like cause I've been raised in the same area so like they know me from since I was a kid and then they'll ask me like oh like can you speak Cantonese

She talks about how she speaks Panjabi, which she is also learning to write (Gurmukhi, the script which Punjabi Sikhs use in India), which pleases her grandparents

[they say] we were able to kind of make our granddaughter feel like you know **this is where you belong and it's important to know where you're where your roots are**

She has an ambivalent sense of Hong Kong as home and in some way not her proper home (in the way that Punjab is)

I feel like I'm **hanging in between like Hong Kong and home**

I feel like because I was born and brought up here I definitely feel that like Hong Kong is home and like I know all these like lovely people and have had some of the best memories here **but then I've never really felt like it was home**

Belonging for Sumeet emerges in her talk as deeply relational, dependent on social connections that are fostered through shared cultural markers, in her case the objects and literacy practices that link her to her Indian – and specifically her Punjabi Sikh – heritage.

TED Talk screenshot the danger of a single story

In the second Photovoice workshop Christine as the facilitator showed an extract from a TED talk from 2009 by the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie called *The Danger of a Single Story*. We included it in the workshop to stimulate a discussion about multiple identities.

In the lecture Adichie shares an anecdote about her roommate in her US university who regarded her with a “patronising well-meaning pity.” The roommate only had a single story of Africa, a single story of pity. There was no room in the story for an African being similar to her in any way.

Sumeet reflected on the experience that Adichie recounted in her TED talk. I've transcribed this extract in detail, to give a sense of how narratives of belonging emerge in the interaction of the workshops.

PV2, whole group discussion. S: Sumeet; C: Christine; P: other participant

0:56:56

1 S: I think this whole time (.) one thing I noticed
2 was how she:: was able to identify that (.)

3 her partner was not being racist and her roommate was
4 not being racist (.) but rather it was just the one story
5 that she knew of Africa (.) and immediately that made
6 me think of anytime perhaps **I've communicated with**
7 someone who was a local (.)
8 C: mm
9 S: and they told me they loved curry [cos they
10 C: [oh no
11 S: thought I was [Indian
12 P: [laughs
13 S: and so it was really:: like at that point like
14 I don't get offended or anything cos I assume that's
15 just all that they know about **my culture** but then
16 C: yup
17 S: but then (.) it's now that I know OK it's because of
18 all these stories (.) that they've possibly heard from (.)
19 people around them that makes them think OK **India**
20 equals curry or something
21 C: yeah yeah
22 S: [and it
23 P: [it does
24 all: [[laughter]]

This is Sumeet's initial reflection, straight after watching the video. She notes that she immediately recalled times *I've communicated with someone who is a local* (lines 6-7) – by which we assume again she is referring to a Hong Konger from a Cantonese linguistic and Chinese cultural and ethnic background.

She reports the response that she says is typically made – that *they told me they loved curry* because, as she says, *they thought I was Indian* (lines 9-11). She then refers to *my culture* (line 15) – indexing a cultural identity as someone from an Indian background, and reinforcing what for her is her non-local status.

In her account, the experience of hearing *all these stories* makes 'locals' think *India equals curry or something* (19-20). The supportive backchannel from Christine contrasts with one of the other participants confirming – jokingly – that *it does* (line 23).

Digital Stories

Before I hand over to Jess, here are screenshots of the Digital Stories that the Phase 2 participants each eventually produced. I'll give you the link to these at our discussion.

Reflection

There are a number of topics emerging from the Navigating Belonging project that relate to the theme of this seminar series.

The authenticity dilemma

Participants in the project are all – in some sense – seeking legitimacy, attempting to be authentic in Hong Kong.

Nadia Kim (2009) writes of the “authenticity dilemma.” This concept refers to the struggle faced by people when they navigate questions of authentic belonging and identity, especially when living between and across multiple cultural worlds.

For young South Asians like Sumeet, things are complex. Born in Hong Kong, but without a Hong Kong passport, and positioned consistently in policy and public discourse in the homogeneous and racialised category Ethnic Minority (EM) in a predominantly Chinese society – this struggle becomes an enduring feature of their everyday experience.

A focus on the narratives emerging in the interaction in our workshops and interviews enables insights into how participants negotiate the authenticity of their belonging, and – importantly – how they challenge the single story of belonging typically available to minoritized students in Hong Kong. A lot of the participants’ talk in the workshops is around their resistance to being positioned as the linguistic, cultural and racialised other.

Sumeet recounts, for example, how she feels her authenticity and her right to belong in the broader Cantonese-dominant Hong Kong context is compromised at least in part because of language competence. At the same time, she claims that her authentic belonging in relation to her family and heritage is strengthened and ratified when she aligns her language and literacy practices with family expectations.

We can conclude that established ideas of belonging in terms of cultural and linguistic homogeneity are inadequate in the Hong Kong context.

Transcultural capital

The second – related – concept is transcultural capital, the capabilities, knowledge and skills that Sumeet and her fellow participants need, to paraphrase Mansouri & Al-deen (2023), for navigating local integration challenges, creating a sense of belonging to multiple places, and enabling them the agency to negotiate intercultural relations.

Transcultural capital is a notion originating in the sociolinguistics of migration and isn't a new idea. Ulrike Meinhof and Anna Triandafyllidou defined it in 2006 as

the strategic use of knowledge, skills and networks acquired by migrants through connections with their country and cultures of origin which are made active at their new places of residence.

For those authors and possibly for us, through the use of this term we might be able to describe some of the practices that our participants discussed in the workshops. As they put it there are

strategic possibilities of strong local and transnational ties within and across migrant communities (social capital), of widespread bi- or multilingualism, bi- or multiculturalism (cultural capital), of retaining vibrant artistic roots in originating cultures but blending these with new local and global influences.

Migrants can strategically employ their transcultural capital to maximize rather than restrict their options, thus furthering their economic and professional development in their daily lives.

Transcultural capital thus supersedes the oppositional discourses of 'diasporic' communities on the one hand and 'cosmopolitan' flows on the other by underlining the potential arising from a repertoire of options drawn from across the spectrum.

Next steps – Translocal belonging

I am planning a new project called Translocal Belonging and Practices of care among people from South and Southeast Asian backgrounds in Hong Kong

It's a collaborative transdisciplinary project that will study how understandings and expressions of translocal belonging relate to care among diverse groups of adults with South and Southeast Asian backgrounds in Hong Kong.

The project will focus on how people's belonging can be in more than one location, with different communities at different times, and how this translocal belonging is mutually shaped by care relationships and responsibilities, broadly conceived. I've already made the point that people of South Asian heritage in Hong Kong encounter systemic discrimination

and marginalization. This calls into question conventional notions of belonging based on cultural and linguistic homogeneity, as I've said. Their sense of translocal belonging – that is, belonging that transcends local boundaries – is frequently linked to care needs and responsibilities, including personal, domestic and health care (and its delegation) as well as the flow of resources such as money, gifts, news, advice, and support.

References

- Crabtree, S. A. and Wong, H. (2013). 'Ah Cha'! The racial discrimination of Pakistani minority communities in Hong Kong: An analysis of multiple, intersecting oppressions. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 43(5), 945-963.
- De Fina, A. and Georgakopoulou, A. (2012). *Analyzing Narrative: Discourse and Sociolinguistic Perspectives*. Cambridge University Press.
- Fang, G. (2019). Ethnic minority students' progression to university in Hong Kong: Access and equity. *Multicultural Education Review*, 11(2), 135-148.
- Gao, F. (2018). Identity and Chinese language learning among Ethnic Minorities in Hong Kong. In I. Liyanage (ed.), *Multilingual Education Yearbook 2018: Internationalization, Stakeholders & Multilingual Education Contexts* (pp. 125-137). Springer International Publishing.
- Kim, N. Y. (2009). Finding our way home: Korean Americans, "homeland" trips, and cultural foreignness. *Diasporic Homecomings: Ethnic Return Migration in Comparative Perspective*, 305-324.
- Kurtz, C. (2016). Participatory Narrative Inquiry: An Introduction with Examples. https://www.cfkurtz.com/Kurtz_PNI_March2016.pdf
- Li, D. C. S. (2017). *Multilingual Hong Kong*. Springer International Publishing.
- Mansouri, F. & Jamal Al-deen, T. (2023). Acts of transcultural belonging and social empowerment among migrant youth. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 46(10), 1997-2019.
- Meinhof, U. & Triandafyllidou, A. (2006). Beyond the diaspora: Transnational practices as transcultural capital. In U. Meinhof & A. Triandafyllidou (Eds.) *Transcultural Europe: Cultural Policy in a Changing Europe*, p. 200-223. Palgrave.

Robin, B. R. (2008). Digital storytelling: A powerful technology tool for the 21st century classroom. *Theory Into Practice*, 47(3), 220-228.

Simpson, J. and Bradley, J. (2024). Belonging-in-Interaction: Expressing and performing translocal belongings through language and arts practice. *Applied Linguistics* 45, 464-480.

Simpson, J. and Pöyhönen, S. (Eds.) (2024). *Minority Language Learning for Adult Migrants in Europe*. Routledge

Smith, L. T. (2021). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Wang, C., and Burris, M. A. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Education & Behavior*, 24(3), 369-387.

Yuval-Davis, N. (2011). *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations*. Sage.