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Elea Christine Davison
Portland State University

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Being American: An Illustrated Conversation on Identity

by

Elea Christine Davison

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

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Thesis Adviser

Celestia Caredio

Portland State University

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BEING AMERICAN

An Illustrated Conversation on Identity

Author

Elea Davison

Adviser

Celestia Caredio

INTRODUCTION

With the United States in upheaval due to political divide one might begin to question how their country reflects on them. How much of your personal identity do you attribute to being from the United States and being an American? Do you ever feel judged by others due to national stereotypes of your country? These are questions I will attempt to explore in my study of national identity and how much it informs where we place ourselves in our own country and world.

I will be compiling illustrated-based research in the form of small magazines, or zines. These approachable booklets will help to communicate the opinions of Americans from the United States of America and Argentina on the topic of being American. They will also serve as a tool to open the conversation of using the word “American” with a higher sensitivity and awareness.

GUIDING QUESTION

How do people born in the United States of America and Argentines born in Argentina understand what it means to be and identify as an “American” through an illustrative lens?

Based on the following research, it can be surmised that illustration is not regarded as a formal and viable method of data collection. On the side of cultural identity, it can be seen that there is not one simple definition of an “American,” and that several relevant hybrids of an American exist.

The Being American zines are an example of a meaningful collection of illustrations as readable data, and an interactive conversation starter to spread awareness of the term “American.”

RESEARCH+ FINDINGS

ILLUSTRATIONS AS A VIABLE SOURCE It is common practice in sociology to marginalize the use of visual methods. They are seen as a “pleasant distraction to the real (i.e., word orientated) work that constituted ‘proper research’” (98, Prosser) However, what people connect in their mind and form into images, for my purposes, illustrated ones, requires connecting several elements from their lives, forming a valuable artifact for study by the social science field. A study by Marilys Guillemín uses the technique of running interviews with drawing being the product of each interview question. She worked with women and their journey through menopause as well as woman and their experience living with heart disease. She found that the drawings acted as symbols and metaphors for their experience, which could be interpreted best through this method of drawing. Guillemín found that “...drawings as a research method expands our interpretations as researchers..”(286) in the multitude of ways people understand their experiences and where it places them in the world.

CULTURAL IDENTITIES SOUTH AMERICA People might assume that if you are from a country in the Americas you are either Canadian, American, Mexican, South American, or some variation based on country of birth. In Mexico this is happening with Mayans living in Mexico, being called mestizaje. “Mestizaje celebrated racial and cultural mixture as a way of forging a unified and homogeneous national image” (307, Safa). Even though these people identified as Mayan they were labeled under this general group for ease when it came to government consolidation. As of now, there have been several movements challenging and proclaiming cultural autonomy versus a general term for a diverse selection of groups. Sara goes on to say that identity in Latin America is becoming more of a “...fluid concept of race...” (311). This is because people move between communities when they adopt certain

cultural and class characteristics and can be accepted as the race associated with those traits. Safa concludes that traditional ideas of belonging to a culture are emerging from personal past rather than a strict interpretation of identity conceived by the government under which one is born.

GOVERNMENT INFLUENCE ON IDENTITY Anthropologists view Argentines as identifying by a regimented class system. This class system is informed by what stance they take on political issues, especially when it comes to taxation. Anthropologists, like Abelin, examine Argentine identity through their relationship with their government. Abelin describes the seizure of a car and how “...the poor felt protected, [while] represented members of the gated community declared that this operation was ‘fiscal terrorism’” (331). The article classifies and identifies Argentines based on where they fell during this conflict around a government issue. This is reinforced by Hale’s writings on ‘identity politics’ and how this “...idiom [is a term] through which groups engage in politics” (572). This explains his standpoint that the emergence of multiple Latin American identities come from political standings people have. This is a current and typical representation of the Argentine people from an anthropological standpoint, defined by their relationship with their government—famously tumultuous, un-trusting. Unfortunately, this puts citizens of Argentina and Latin America into a corner that might not be completely accurate to the person they are in their daily lives. Not everyone defines themselves by their political involvement or opinion.

CONVERSATIONS WITH ARGENTINES With the current political divide in the United States people may be questioning where they belong in an environment where their values are not reflected by actions of their government. However, have we always been meant to question what the term American means to us, on a personal level? After a series of conversations I had with Argentines it was revealed to me that we (people born in the United States of America) are not the only ones who call themselves Americans. The Argentines do too. I felt ignorant for using the term with such freedom up to that point. I wanted to find a way to let people speculate this themselves and define ourselves based on our experience, and if that involves our country then to take pride in it. The Argentines showed me compassion and released the weight I felt of being judged based on my country and being termed as an American. They gave me the opportunity to be valued by my personal experience, not by my country of origin.

RESEARCH (CONTINUED)

DATA FROM SURVEY BOOKLETS A mini sampling of responses.

RESEARCH SUMMARY

+ILLUSTRATIONS ARE A VISUAL PRODUCT AND PROCESS in the ways people come to understand their identity. Drawings as research method expand interpretations of human experience Visual imagery can show how people view the world through its simple and complex facets. It is a visual record of how the drawer understands their current self and how they see the world.

+RE-CLASSIFICATION OF ONE'S NATIONAL IDENTITY INTO IDENTITY POLITICS is a current trend in Latin American anthropology.

+GOVERNMENT OPINION CLASSIFIES PEOPLE based on social class from an outside anthropological perspective

+COUNTLESS LATIN AMERICAN IDENTITIES EXIST, tied to highly-specific cultural heritage.

+USE OF THE WORD AMERICAN IS NOT USED SENSITIVELY due to a lack of knowledge of its weight and meaning to others.

+BOOKLET FINDINGS Please reference the zine for your interpretation of the materials collected.

METHOD

I wanted to have the opinions of the participants speak for themselves, so I chose illustration to guide their exploration of identity. It was an opportunity to add to the discourse of this being a viable research method for anthropologists and graphic designers.

I selected the participants based on the contacts I made while in Argentina. I selected a range of participants based on social class, occupation, age, and gender. This provided me with one 32 year old man, one 24 year old man, one 19 year old man, one 50 year old woman, and one 39 year old woman. I gave each of these participants two extra booklets to share with their friends or family to get a wider range of people beyond who I knew. With these people in mind I selected a similar group of four people based on age and gender and occupation and sent the same number of booklets to them in the United States.

All people received the same booklets, with the difference being the language. The Argentines received booklets translated into Cordobese Spanish and the United States citizens received English versions. The only rule to complete it was to use a black pen. This was to ensure that the focus is on the content, not discrepancy in materials.

The paper the booklets were printed on was simple printer paper, to create a casual, approachable feeling towards completing the booklet and not feeling pressured to rise up and answer on thick, fancy, unforgiving card stock. The size of the paper was trimmed down to 5"x7," making it approachable in size. It was not a typical paper size, leaving the participant with a manageable outlook on the completion of the questions within.

The layout of the booklets is straightforward. The font is clear and easy to read, and there is enough room for the participant to fill in the questions. The language of the questions is casual and meant to engage the participant through humor and how commonplace most of the questions are. There are only a 1-3 questions that require some vulnerability as far as projecting one's opinion goes.

All the questions were designed to be vague in their motive. They attempted to be general enough to address typical customs and habits in the United States and Argentina. They were structured in this way to gauge if people conduct themselves within traditions related to their country, or if they conduct themselves more specifically based on personal experience and family tradition.

THE BIG IDEA

We use the terms American or America quite loosely. I did not realize the weight of these words until I had a conversation with Argentines on the effects of hearing the United States deem itself the one America, when Argentines, and many other people in Central, and South America identify as Americans as well. It is important to question our use of this word, and give ourselves the opportunity to reflect on who we are, associated and, or, disassociated with our country of origin as a symbol of our identity.

Some say that visual-based research is to be disregarded as a valid form of study. However, refusing to experiment with visuals, such as illustrations, to collect opinions and data about current problems is ignoring a great tool. A tool that allows for honesty in communicating ideas and feelings. The process to create a drawing and the meaning that it implies can be an indicator of perceptions of current events and experiences of the drawer. Drawings, when guided by specific prompts, can bring together and inform anthropologists, social scientists, and artists, as well as viewers to issues. This new approach to gaining insights into people's thoughts and how they translate their world into an image is exciting and valuable to attempt.

I have created this set of zines to close this gap, to spread awareness of the usefulness of illustration as a viable method of data collection, and to open the conversation of what it means to be where we are from, from the Americas.

GOALS

+**Spread awareness** to be sensitive when using the word "American" or "America" to describe someone or a place.

+**Provide an example** of a successful study using illustration-based research that can be valuable and accessible for participants.

+**Invite conversation** with the zine as a tool, so that people can have the discussion from the comfort of their own city or home.

+**First of a series** that highlights the comparison of being "American" from many different American countries. For example, Canada and Mexico could be an opportunity to expand the project with similar parameters.

IMPLEMENTATION

These zines will be published and distributed to bookshops in Portland, Oregon, where the zines and project were imagined, as well as Sonoma County, California, where the United States participants came from, and Córdoba, Argentina, where the Argentine participants were from. This zine is targeted at the general public who are interested in challenging their perception of identity and what it means to be an American. It is targeted at Argentines and people from the United States to see commonalities and differences based on being an individual, not based not on the country you are born in.

Another group these zines exist for is as an example to anthropologists of their value as artifacts of cultures. Anthropologists will be provided with an example of visual-based research that shows expressions of personal identity throughout two continents.

Zines will be gifted to each of the participants as well and three extra copies to share with their friends and family.

ZINE DESIGN CHOICES

When exploring successful zine layouts I went to several zine libraries throughout Oregon and California to see which I was attracted to most to open out of all the zines to choose from. In this way I determined size, color, type, language, and levels of interactivity for my set of zines.

When selecting zines, I was most drawn to smaller, hand sized zines that seemed approachable to pick up and would not hold a ton of information. Zines in black and white were easy to print and eye-catching. Type was limited on the booklets I chose and there was a good amount of blank space for the eye to rest and absorb the information of the previous pages. The language of the zines I was attracted to was humorous, light hearted, and offered tips and tricks in life. Interactive components were not present in the zines I saw.

For the final version of the zine I chose yellow paper to command attention and to hint at the yellow sticky note, an informal starter of conversation. It is entirely in black ink to draw attention to the images and is bilingual to allow readings from both Argentines and United States of American citizens.

ZINE PAGES

See supplemental file for complete zine PDF version.

Pacing illustration page.

Pacing quote page.

Compilation of “America” page.

Argentines explain word “American.”

Compilation of “American” page.

LIMITATIONS

The limits of this project are the reach the zine will have without a web presence. The zines will be donated to a handful of bookstores in Portland, Oregon and Healdsburg, California, limiting their reach to these locations and the friends and families of the participants.

Another limiting factor is my sample size. I did not have many contacts in Argentina, and not all of them chose to participate in data collection.

There will be no formal analysis of the data collected. My only contribution will be curating how the data I collect from the answers will be laid out in each of the participants zines. This might be seen as what anthropologist's usually criticize about the use of illustration as evidence, that it is too open to interpretation. The aim of this project is less about analysis, instead engaging an audience in a conversation about national identity informing personal identity, and proving an example of visual data collection in an engaging way.

BENEFITS

Through this project I hope to inspire researchers to see illustration as a method for the participant to reflect and make meaning of their experience and world view through a new outlet that can be studied. Using this method and curating it into an easily reproducible and accessible zine can invite people to have the conversation of what it means to be American. It will guide them through their own answers and the answers of people across the globe to form a respect and compassion for other Americans.

CONCLUSION

The Being American set of zines will be a resource for communities and people interested in the word "American" and the connotations it has. In a climate where people are aware of actions of their own and other countries, how do they want to be judged by others? By their morals and values, or by the actions of their government and its history? It will be an opportunity to start a conversation about the place we are from and what that brings to our characters, and what it does not tell others about our characters. It will be an example of capturing identity of a select group of people through a method of research rarely seen, visual. This method and final product will be an example of gathering data visually.

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