



I Am My Identity Kit: Using Artifact Data in Research on Identity

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Resumen/ Abstract

This presentation addresses how to collect and analyze artifacts in ethnographic and qualitative research, and the value of using artifacts in research which seeks to describe and interpret the identities that research participants construct. We believe that artifacts can be very useful in such research, because they tell us about the every day, taken-for-granted cultural meanings that people give to their surroundings, the things they make, their tools, toys, clothing, and even natural objects that have been given cultural meanings. Artifacts can be used to determine what people value, and how they adapt the resources they have to their needs. However, artifacts most often consist simply of souvenirs and clothing collected by researchers; they usually are under-utilized as research data themselves. Artifacts are large and lumpy and difficult to ship home. They may be immovable, as is the case with features of the natural environment—mountains, urban environments, etc. In every case, they are difficult to analyze directly because research privileges data that can be manipulated easily— numbers and words. Nonetheless, we believe that artifacts can provide both a stimulus for collecting rich information about people and their culture, and also a window into otherwise unexamined questions in anthropological, sociological, educational, and other social science research. Visual anthropology and sociology has made use of wide photographs to supplement verbal description (Collier and Collier 1986). Anthropologists also have analyzed artifacts in the process of describing manufacturing and economies in communities they study. However, we believe that artifacts have been little used in studies of education (but see LeCompte and Preissle 1993), and especially in the study of processes of identity construction and maintenance.

In an era of highly mobile populations, home culture no longer provides the sole and stable anchor for identity. Many people migrate back and forth between several countries, communities and cultures. Personal and community identity, then, must adapt to several environments at once. We believe that migrants form hybrid identities made up of components from multiple cultures and environments. Examining the artifacts that they use and surround themselves with can provide a window into dynamic processes of identity construction.

In summary, as ethnographic researchers we realize the value that artifacts have had for us, as data objects and as a way to create conversations with participants about the objects, their functions, and their uses historically and currently. We believe that this issue remains insufficiently examined in the literature.

Palabras clave / Keywords: identity construction, artifacts, data analysis

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1. Defining and Collecting Artifacts

Researchers tend to privilege text-based data, or things which can be written down on paper or electronically coded and subjected to statistical analysis. The most common forms of data are interviews, observations, or other measures of what people think or have done (self-reports, surveys and questionnaire) or what they know (tests). Because qualitative researchers tend to privilege the written or spoken word and the observable event, they can overlook the meanings embedded in objects created by and surrounding the people whom they study—what commonly is called the “material culture” and composed of artifacts.

We define artifacts as objects used in everyday life that usually are produced by human beings. In general, they are part of the “made environment” or material culture, but natural objects that have been given cultural meanings can serve as artifacts as well, as can natural objects that evoke or are represented in human made objects. Artifacts usually are smaller objects: tools, utensils, clothing, artworks, sacred items, books, toys—not houses, bridges, vehicles, factories. They often are given meaning by particular colors, shapes, building materials, or even the people who make or use them, and they vary widely, depending on resources available and how those resources are adapted to human needs. Artifacts often are simply something collected by researchers as souvenirs of the field, but they can be data points that illuminate important research questions. A problem, however, is that they are not often used sufficiently as data. In this paper, we argue that artifacts can help a researcher tell an authentic story if they are creatively defined and used as data points.

2. Characteristics of Artifacts

We believe that there are three kinds of artifacts: text-based, semi-text based, and physical objects. Text based artifacts are written, and include newspapers, books, papers, letters, essays, diaries, journals, position papers, and statements of purpose, philosophies, goals and objectives. They explicitly state what the individual or group under consideration thinks or believes, and how they conceptualize or identify themselves. Semi-text based artifacts are primarily on paper, but they aren’t text. They include photographs, drawings, maps, posters. These communicate much information, but its meaning often must be inferred. Participants also may have to explain the meanings as well as what actually is depicted, or what the items are used for. Objects also can be defined as artifacts; they include almost any kind of material item not on paper. They include tools, toys, religious objects, clothing, artworks, jewelry, kitchenware, and foodstuffs.

While every ethnographer collects artifacts—souvenirs of the field—most do not use them as a key focus for data collection. Usually, they end up decorating the ethnographer’s house, and attesting to his or her many travels. This isn’t just carelessness or an oversight. Artifacts aren’t like field notes, interviews, or surveys. They can be difficult to carry and hard to ship home. Most can’t sent via an electronic



file or pasted into research reports. Some, such as buildings or mountains, can only be “collected” in the form of representations—like photographs or drawings—no matter how important they might be as identity markers.

Imagine a mountain called Blanca Peak, which actually is located in southern Colorado, in the geographic area that Navajos believe is their place of origin. It is hard for non-Navajos to comprehend the importance of geography to the sense of self of the Navajo people. However, Navajos truly feel that they are only “home” if they are living within the square marked by four sacred mountains in the American southwest, the NE most of which is Blanca Peak. “Home” is where the sacred rituals that mark important life stages or promote harmony and healing in the community must take place and where the sacred herbs necessary for performing ceremonies grow. An ethnographer can’t bring home a mountain, but a good photograph can suffice. If the ethnographer also can bring home a painting of the mountain which includes visual representations of the icons and symbols that it and the three other sacred mountains represent, that painting can augment a description of what the sacred geography connotes.

3. To Use an Artifact in Research

When using artifacts to determine what people think about themselves and their environment and how they live within it, ethnographers must transform the artifacts with which people surround themselves into “texts” that can be “read.” Donna Deyhle (1987), for example, used receipts from the local general store to help her portray the economy of the tiny town which served as the trade center for her field site. The sales receipts were pieces of paper displaying what Navajos in the community purchased and how much was paid in each purchase. From these receipts, she was able to construct a good idea of what people ate, and what they couldn’t make or grow themselves. It was one powerful measure of the economy in her research site.

Thus, artifacts have to be identified; they then have to be categorized. Categorizing artifacts raises questions with which ethnographers must wrestle. For example,

- Is a poster, which contains text, graphics, and artwork, a text? Or something else?
- Can a weaving whose designs carry cultural significance, be “read” like a text?
- Can student projects or artworks represent various aspects of the students’ selves, or of the school tasks, and thus be “read” for meaning?
- Does the researcher actually understand from the informant’s perspective what the artifact is?
- Is the meaning the researcher has assigned to this artifact the same as that given to it by the user? If not, what explains the differences?

4. Creating a Field Guide

Analysis of artifacts begins with elicitation of participants' descriptions. Interviewing and observing participants regarding the artifacts they use or make enables the researcher to create a text which can then be analyzed; it also provides a way to talk deeply about issues that may be difficult for research participants to discuss. To do this, ethnographers first must create plans or field guides for interviews and observations that determine:

- The questions to be asked about artifacts in conversations and interviews,
- To whom should the questions be asked;
- The observations to be carried out, where, when, and with whom;
- Any documentary material (archives, books, research) that might already exist about the objects; and
- What member checks and other safeguards are needed to assure valid and reliable descriptions.

These are, of course, the same sorts of plans or field guides created for other aspects of a study (see Schensul and LeCompte 1999), but the focus specifically is on the artifacts of interest. In Ludwig's case (2006), the objects of interest were the weavings that they women made, which were absolutely crucial in understanding aspects of life the Mayan women were unable to articulate.

5. Finding the Origins of Artifacts

Ludwig first had to determine the origins of the artifacts. Were they made

- By people for their own use—such as clothing, tools?
- By people for the use of others?
- By people in response to requests by superiors, such as students' work?
- In response to a researcher's request—diaries, journals, samples of toys?
- As an object of admiration or veneration, as in artwork or religious items?

6. Eliciting a description

The next stage involved creating a series of descriptions:

- The material description—What's it made of, why? Shape, color, size, form? What kind of person made this? Why did this particular person(s) make it and not another person? How old is it? Are these things still made? Is it decorated? How? Are other similar objects similarly decorated?



- The functional description— Who uses the object? What for? Is it used just for specific purposes? Only by certain individuals? Who are they, and what limitations are placed on its use by others? If it's old, are things like this still made? Are they still used in the same way, or do they have new uses? Can other objects serve the same purposes? If so, under which circumstances are substitutions made?
- The symbolic description— What does it mean to use/wear/create this object? What would happen if someone else did? Do the components or pieces of the object carry meanings in themselves? What about the color? Materials? Designs??
- The historical description—Have the previous descriptions changed over time? If so, how they have changed in use, production or meaning over time?

As mundane as they may seem, systematically answering these questions creates a text which researchers can use to link objects and artifacts to other forms of data in an overall process of analysis. The text, in addition to repeatedly examining and re-examining the artifacts themselves, enables the ethnographer to “make sense” of why people present and re-present themselves publicly as they do. In the process of “making sense” of artifacts, ethnographers can learn a great deal about the ways in which people construct, maintain, and even transform their identities.

7. Artifacts and Identities

People make, wear, use and talk about artifacts to communicate information about how they want themselves and their communities to be seen by others. These artifacts powerfully evoke identity, even if they are just utilitarian objects-- tools, toys, clothing, and even natural objects that have been given cultural meanings. Artifacts often are decorated to express the values and beliefs, identities and concepts to which people as individuals and members of a culture adhere. For example, indigenous carvers in the American Northwest that the Indians made their bone and ivory fishhooks as beautifully as possible, and in the shape of the desired fish to show respect for the fish they wanted to catch.

8. The Identity Kit

In everyday life, people rely on visual and auditory markers to identify and categorize the people around them so that they can figure out how they can and should interact with each other. Goffman (1959) argued that social roles consist of socially recognized behaviors, expectations and beliefs associated with a particular position in a social structure. They are enhanced by markers which people adopt and “put on” to enhance their performance of a given role. Goffman (1961) calls these markers an “identity kit” expressed in types of clothing, jewelry, cosmetics and hair styles, housing and interior decorations, tools people use, the leisure activities and foods they prefer, their modes of movement, speech codes and styles, the proxemics and kinesics of their interaction, and even personal tastes that one practices by associating with others who



share the desired role. (Hall, 1974). Artifacts that mark identity don't have to be exotic. The "identity kit" of the United States' tourist--athletic shoes, drip dry shorts and pants, t-shirts, and waterproof parkas--as clearly identifies where they are from as do their passports. Such artifacts tell us about the every day, taken-for-granted cultural meanings that people give to their surroundings, the things they make and what they value, how they are most comfortable, and how they adapt the resources they have to their needs.

More often than not, people tend to be unaware of what their identity markers communicate. However, people can manipulate these markers to communicate information about how they would *like* themselves and their communities to be seen by others. Unfortunately, this doesn't always work, and people make cultural mistakes—such as a woman who comes too well-dressed to a party; a social-climbing man whose table manners or drinking habits are considered vulgar by his colleagues; a teacher who thinks that a delicacy one of her students brings from home for the teacher to eat is disgusting and inedible or even evidence that the child's family lacks culture. To understand the impact of these "mistakes," researchers must be aware of both the connotative and denotative meanings of identity markers in all groups involved.

In the pages that follow, we describe how we have used artifacts to elicit, describe and interpret the identities our research participants constructed. We feel this is important because artifacts (or material culture [Johnson 1980]) have been little used in both studies of education (but see LeCompte and Preissle, 1993) and identity construction and maintenance—fields of our special interest.

9. Identity Markers in Migrating Populations

Understanding the artifacts that represent identity is especially important when populations migrate back and forth between several countries, communities and cultures, because the home culture of migrants no longer provides their principal and stable anchor for identity. They may encounter work environments whose tenets and requirements contradict ideals and practices valued in the home. In some cases, the new community may forbid use of key visible aspects of one's religious or cultural identification, such as turbans for Sikhs and headscarfs for Muslim women. Personal and community identity, then, must adapt to several environments at once. To do so, many migrants must form hybrid identities composed of elements from multiple cultures and environments. Gibson (1988) has called this process "accommodation without assimilation"—in which immigrants incorporate some aspects of the school or work environment into their everyday tasks and belief structure, but leave other key cultural characteristics marking their identity intact. The Punjabi Sikh school children whom Gibson studied, for example, adopted a work ethic and study habits that make them successful in school, while maintaining the dress, food preferences, and socializing patterns desired by their parents—despite the fact that traditional behavior marked them as exotic at school. Carefully noting what aspects of ethnic identity or styling are retained and which are set aside illuminates not only the kinds of external pressures faced by migrants, but also the values and practices which either are crucial to

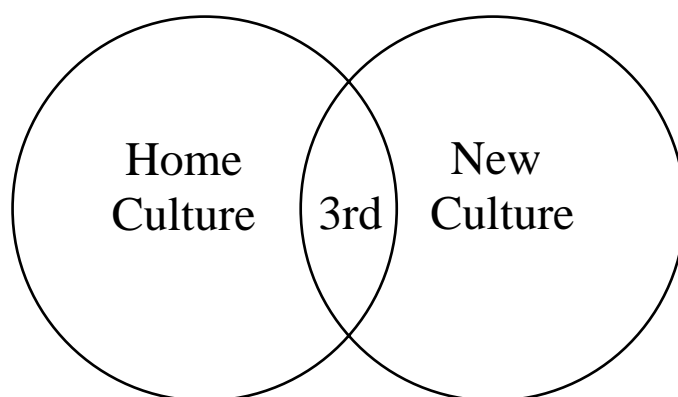


the maintenance of community identity, or which would be too costly to the individual to discard, because doing so would anger parents and authorities or violate taboos.

10. Negotiating Identities: Enduring, Situated, and Endangered Selves

Spindler and Spindler's (2000) notions of enduring, situated, and endangered self are useful here. The enduring self represents bedrock beliefs and behavior patterns essential to one's sense of cultural esteem and well being. The situated self is more immediate; it emerges as individuals both negotiate between old expectations and values and those expected in a new context; and enact new roles required in the community of migration. The endangered self develops when the sacrifices requested are so great that negotiation and accommodation are impossible and cultural shock, alienation and deculturation ensue. Punjabi children did not find that being "A" students threatened their core identity as Sikhs. However, defying their parents by refusing traditional food, discarding traditional dress, and interacting with members of the opposite sex would have angered parents and created an endangered self. A female Muslim college student in the United States can maintain the traditional dress of Muslim women while using the latest technology to acquire a western education. The hijab and long dress denote her religious convictions, just as her college attendance denotes her commitment to educational advancement and careers. This involves negotiating two legitimate identities at once—that of an observant Muslim woman in a secular, non-Muslim community and that of a diligent student in a community whose members do not define Muslim women as enterprising and scholarly. The endangered self would emerge if parents decided that the committed Muslim college student was losing her religion and arranged an unwanted marriage for her, thus ending her education.

Figure 1. The Third Space



The alienated and endangered self, however, is not the final stage of adaptation. Some people are able to create a hybrid "self," one which is an amalgam of customs,

behaviors and beliefs chosen by, imposed upon, or maintained by the individuals from the multiple cultural settings in which they find themselves. Figure 1 depicts what Anzaldúa (2007) and others refer to as a “third space,” or the psychic territory of this hybrid self, made up of the intersection between the natal culture and that of the new environment, whether it be a country or a place of work or school. The third space is neither the old world nor totally the new; it makes clear that the person with hybrid or mestizo identity lives in both and refuses to choose between old and new. It is in the or third space that such individuals celebrates their links and anchors in multiple worlds.

11. Third Space Identity

Obviously, how third space individuals enact their hybrid identities will vary widely, depending on the degree of oppression and types of opportunities they face in their new environment. Two concepts are useful here: Recognition of social niches and legitimacy of that recognition. In her study of identity niches, Davidson (1996) suggests that each social system evolves a number of recognized social roles or niches. People may move in or out of those niches, depending on their capacity to enact the behaviors required. Relevant to this discussion is that in many communities, there are no recognized positive roles for immigrants other than for one or two tolerated exotics. Exotics do not require integration in the society; they are too few to possess power. However, when they increase in numbers and power, they become a threat to the existing social order. They cannot reasonably move into and occupy the existing roles or social niches; those already are taken. Rather, migrants have to create new social roles of niches which not only are workable for them, but which are recognized by older residents as legitimate. Thus, identity construction is a reciprocal process; while migrants can decide to “be” or to “inhabit” a particular identity niche, and can adopt the behaviors and markers of that niche, they remain invaders, illegals or aliens until and unless the existing society accepts them as legitimate inhabitants of that niche. Often, achieving such acceptance is a time-consuming and difficult process.

For researchers, assessing the nature and meaning of what people carry around with them to denote identity must be elicited from participants. Imagine a European-American woman in a business suit, carrying a brief case, a laptop computer, a cell phone, and a large handbag. The preceding items, as well as her clothing, indicate that she is a professional working person, and is in fact, “on the job.” While for many people, a computer is simply a tool for getting work done, to researchers like the authors of this document, it’s a symbol of our own identity, and actually, a surrogate for our own brains. Carrying around a laptop computer signifies to others that we’re always “at work” even when we’re on vacation. Adding to our “carry ons” a cell phone, Ipad, and other new types of electronic communication devices means we’re so important that we can’t be out of touch with professional colleagues, family and friends. However, in some countries, while a cell phone denotes a symbol of certain economic status and one’s connection to the modern world, it also may be the only means of telephone or electronic communication available, if an adequate telecommunications infrastructure is lacking. Not knowing the context of the identity kit can lead to making mistakes in



knowing the roles that people occupy, as well as who they want to be and how appropriately to interact with them.

Often people can change roles simply by changing their identity kit, as Mayan people do when they change from indigenous to western clothing. Quite often, identity kits are enforced by codes for behavior, speech and dress. With respect to ethnicity, social psychologist Beverly Tatum (1997) describes multiple states of racial or ethnic identity formation experienced by individuals in multi-ethnic societies. Tatum suggests that in the initial stages of ethnic identity formation, individuals begin to “own” their own identity by adopting the clothing, toys, trappings, styling, tastes and environments of their chosen identity. This constitutes what they feel are elements of the enduring identity which they want others to recognize. Tatum, however, writes from the perspective of racial identity formation in public schools in the United States, a rather protected environment where the stakes are relatively low. In other situations, celebrating an “enduring self” by openly adopting its identity kit and cultural markers can subject a person to ridicule or even death, especially if the identity it represents is considered by the receiving society to be degenerate, immoral, or value-less. In such cases, it is considered to be a “spoiled” or stigmatized identity (Goffman 1963). If it cannot be legitimized, then it must be hidden lest its possessor be shunned, mistreated, deported or even killed. Such is the case of immigrant undocumented workers or young graffiti artists in the United States. It is not the work they do, but their lack of legal status which makes them illegitimate—and which must be hidden. In the United States, such artworks are declared illegal in most communities and are painted over as soon as they are discovered. In part, it’s because the painters often are ethnic minorities; most also are juveniles who are considered minor criminals and gang members. Further, the murals often express political protests. In Guatemala, by contrast, wall murals are accepted and document historical events. By further contrast, a student in an arts program in a public school may be eccentric and even messy in dress and demeanor, but what they are doing is part of the regular and accepted educational program. Thus, such a student can create art similar to the graffiti artist, but still be considered legitimate even if the content of their artwork is political and controversial.

12. Contested Identities, Contested Spaces

We suggest that ethnic identity formation is a contested territory in which people engage to the degree to which they are willing to experience the negative consequences of identifying with a “spoiled identity” (Goffman 1963) or of being rejected for trying to adopt an identity that isn’t deemed legitimate for them. In the Rocky Mountain states in the United States prior to the 1990s, legitimate ethnic identity slots for people termed “Mexicans” included only three types of people:

- Rich foreign nationals who came to ski and shop;
- the historic population of middle income Mexican-American ranchers who been small landholders for centuries in the area, and
- “Chicanos,” or urban Mexican Americans who had had been born in the community, and now were politically active fighting for the social and political rights of native born people of Mexican descent (Martinez 1998).



Everyone else was considered to be an “illegal”—regardless of their actual immigration status. In the schools, this manifested as wearing of clothing denoting the nationality of the students or their length of residence in the USA; it soon evolved into gang-related behavior and outright gang warfare.

13. Analyzing Artifacts: Making Sense of the Text

The Pinnacle Studies and Arts Focus

We now describe how we actually have used artifacts to study “identity work.” In our own work we have studied the process of identity construction in the diaspora inhabited by Central American immigrants (Ludwig) and in other multicultural spaces (LeCompte). In the Navajo Reservation (LeCompte 1994; LeCompte and McLaughlin 1994; LeCompte 1996) and in regular USA schools (Holloway and LeCompte 2001; LeCompte LeCompte 2006) collections of artworks of students, student essays, photographs of the classroom and the natural environment, instructional materials, curriculum guides reflected the cultural meanings and conflicts inherent in each environment. For example, pressure to assimilate for Navajo children was symbolized by the material environment of their schools, which displayed only White, middle class, European-American cultural icons and language. Absolutely nothing Navajo was hung on the walls, portrayed in the artwork, exhibited in the language, or discussed in the curriculum. The material culture contradicted the stated educational priority given to valuing and preserving the Navajo language and culture; in fact, in appearance and curriculum, the schools could have been anywhere in the United States—not in the unique, culturally rich, Navajo homeland.

In a study of a multidisciplinary program of arts for middle-school children, LeCompte hoped to examine the impact of participation in the arts on the identity construction of students and teachers. She soon realized that the artifacts used in the theater program, for example, were critical to students enacting the roles of actors, and of alternative personalities. The costumes, swords and weapons, the make-up kits, and their actual acting all allowed the children to practice and enact identities and roles that were alternatives to traditional gender and occupational roles they initially envisioned for themselves. Talking to girls about, for example, the impact of learning to fight with real swords while playing the part of a man in “Romeo and Juliet,” made it clear that the swords themselves represented a power that girls had never felt before. Similarly, owning a make-up kit made students feel like real actors, allowed them to try on alternative identities, and opened acting as an occupational possibility. Similarly, in visual arts, students created portraits of themselves and their worlds both as they really were, and as the students imagined them to be. They made masks that were supposed to portray their “hidden personalities.” Collecting these artifacts and talking to students about why they portrayed themselves as they did, was a vivid window into their lives and thoughts.

Holloway and LeCompte (2001) found that as students in the theater strand of the Arts Focus program began to act out roles, and use the skills they’d learned to



express themselves more eloquently in public meetings, they created artifacts that quite explicitly demonstrated how they were “trying on” and imaginatively rehearsing different roles and ways of being in the world (Mead 1934; Goffman 1959; 1961). Visual arts students, for example, learned to build the sets and make the costumes students in plays wore. They also drew pictures that represented themselves in new and different environments, and as they imagined their own futures. Students wrote and enacted plays that for them, constituted participating in an imagined world—and in imagined roles. Keeping track of and monitoring the changes over time in how the students chose to represent themselves, and how their identity kits changed, provided strong corroboratory evidence of changes that they were experiencing, but which they often were not able to describe well in words.

The Moon Goddess Cooperativa

For her dissertation research (2006), Ludwig became an apprentice to Kaqchikel Mayan women weavers in Guatemala to study indigenous ways of learning and teaching. In the Moon Goddess Cooperativa, Guatemala, Central America, Ludwig treated the weavings women made as both data objects and as a means of establishing conversations with participants about the objects and their various functions and uses historically and currently. Given that a central research question of Ludwig’s study was how and why Kaqchikel Mayan women in Guatemala were able to maintain strong sense of ethnic identity while facing centuries of systematic oppression and genocide, understanding both the weavings of the women, and how they were created and used, provided a crucial link to understanding how these weavers produced and reproduced their identities.

A collection of the clothing worn by contemporary Mayan women not only provided a vivid glimpse of material culture in Mayan communities, but also displayed graphically changes in technology and aesthetics, and patterns of exchange and economy. Ludwig examined the weavings themselves for their use of color and design, the historical meanings of, and changes in the designs. Conversations with the women created texts elaborating on more contemporary meanings and uses. While Ludwig could have inferred many of these meanings from her own observations, a careful “reading” of the artifacts helped to establish the validity of her research findings. For example, Guatemalan women still prefer to wear their own weavings, not only because they are warm and comfortable, but because they identify the weavers as members of specific village communities and the individual weavers by the distinctive motifs they create. Complex huipiles, or blouses, though, take as much as a year to make and are expensive; they are prized by art collectors and tourists. Many women can’t afford to wear their own best weavings because they have to sell them as fast as they can make them. So, simpler, easier to make huipiles serve the same purpose of body covering. So also does even cheaper, used clothing from the United States. Both keep the women warm and decently clothed, but both lack the cultural meaning that huipiles of their own design carry.

Further, the ability of a young Mayan woman is assessed by her ability to weave well; it reflects her talent and intelligence. Selling weavings also pays for corn, school fees for children, cell phones computers, and other modern needs. The weavers say as long as they can weave, they will always be able to support themselves and their families.



Weaving builds community, and is a primary way in which Mayan culture is maintained and transmitted. The time spent weaving is when the generations to learn from each other. The ancient designs woven into the cloth carry meanings about life and what is valued among the Maya; the children learn because they quite literally grow up on the looms, playing on them when their mothers are not weaving, sleeping under them when they are infants, and watching their family members as they weave each days for hours.

Analysis of weavings enabled Ludwig to determine that in Mayan communities, weaving

- Creates wearing apparel
- Produces items for use in the home
- Creates regalia and covers used in ceremonial occasions
- Is an economic asset, as weavings are made to sell
- Is a way to establish community
- Constitutes a means of artistic expression

To learn all of this, Ludwig had to elicit symbolic descriptions, or to compile the meanings of weaving, in the highland Guatemalan villages, where looms are central and active features of the home and community. In effect, she had to determine what it meant to use/wear/create a particular object; what would happen if someone else wore, created, or used that object, whether or not the components or pieces of the object carried meanings in themselves, and if the actual color, materials, designs, and spacing of the designs, as well as where it was found or used, had meanings relevant to the individual weaver's identity. Ludwig used the women's weavings, as well as information about the symbolic meaning of the weavings themselves, the tools and techniques used to create them, how they were used and why they were worn, as a catalyst to investigate the strength and persistence of the women's Mayan identity despite systematic and long-standing oppression of the Mayan people throughout more than 500 years of colonial subjugation. Profound contradictions existed between the environment of the local public school—devoid of any reference to Mayan culture—and the widespread use of Mayan cultural icons for tourist advertising by the government. Clearly visible was the lack of connection between, on the one hand, celebration of the artifacts that Mayan people make, and the government's simultaneous efforts to subjugate the Mayan people themselves. Working with and talking to the women weavers about what they were weaving, why they chose the designs they used, and what it meant to them to wear their own weavings gave Ludwig a window into their world. The women themselves were not literate, and some were fluent only in the Kakchiquel language. They were not facile in verbally articulating their feelings about their roles and indigenous identities. However, Ludwig could elicit information about these issues during conversations about weaving with the women—during the time-honored socializing of daily conversations among women. Such introspection could not have been elicited in any other way.

14. The Dangers of Generalization

However, transferring cultural meanings from one setting to another can be risky, as Barbara Medina's (1998) study of a Navajo community and its bilingual Navajo/English elementary school language program demonstrated. Since Navajo people still widely engage in weaving as a commercial and personal artistic venture, some of the senior classroom teachers in Medina's study created a science and social studies unit on weaving. It included field trips to collect dye plants, creating a sheep camp where children cared for sheep and sheared their wool, lessons on making dyes and coloring the wool, and practice in carding and spinning the wool into thread—something the teachers thought would be a culturally relevant unit for the beginning of the school year. They also set up a loom in the classroom so that students could practice weaving. However, none of the teachers could weave. They had to ask their aides—who still wove—to instruct the students. This represented a loss of status for the teachers, since they had to admit that the aides knew something that they didn't, so they stopped asking the aides to teach weaving. Thus, once the initial classroom unit was completed, the loom sat unused for the remainder of the year. Medina referred to it as “the silent loom”—eloquent for what it said about the loss of cultural meaning and the status differentials in that community.

Medina's (1998) study showed a loom that symbolized something quite different from the looms in Ludwig's village—something that only became obvious because of Medina's detailed understanding of cultural meanings and social status in the community. Her analysis also serves as a caution against making hasty inferences; Medina could have mistaken the presence of the loom in the classroom for a real enthusiasm among the teachers for traditional culture—and weaving—which it wasn't at all.

Ludwig (2006) was able to use photographs of the Guatemalan women and their art work to depict a positive sense of ethnic identity. By contrast, Martinez (1998) found that Latino immigrant children's self-portraits in a mixed ethnic school in the United States clearly depicted the negative impact of immigration on the self-esteem of Central American immigrant children to a mostly white and affluent Rocky Mountain community. Photographs of the classroom, curriculum guides, teacher interviews and even classroom observations would not have hinted that the children felt isolated or left out, but the colors used by the children to depict themselves and their classmates, as well as the expressions on their faces, told a very different story. Latino immigrant children depicted the white children with smiling, pure white faces and blonde hair, and themselves with dark brown skin—much darker than their skin really was—and sad expressions. Martinez's (1998) collection of artifacts--children's artwork--told a very different story from Ludwig's (2006), whose photographs showed Mayan women and their children surrounded by symbols from their native culture in daily use.

15. Conclusion

We hope that these few examples, as well as the procedures we've described will help identify a different and useful strategy for eliciting material about identity,



especially in our current dynamic world. If nothing else, we hope that our presentation will make our audience more sensitive to the meanings of the signs and symbols, decorations and presentations of self used by our research participants.

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