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An Autoethnographic Exercise: Deep-thinking, Art, and Contemplation in Socio-Cultural Anthropology *



In the Fall 2018, students in *ANTH 513: Ethnographic Methods* were asked to complete an exercise combining deep thinking about identity through practices of creativity and contemplation. One aim of the exercise was to help students achieve a compassionate and empathetic approach to research by overcoming and uniting their own fragmented identities.

The exercise consisted of several stages. The first one was for students to spend fifteen minutes reflecting on their socio-cultural identities, considering the following questions: How do you self-identify? What do you know about your family histories? Then they were urged to imagine justifying their identities to others and ponder how they would go about doing so.

Students wrote down their responses for both stages of the exercise. The next stage included creatively representing their identities on a canvas, by using a variety of materials, such as paint, ink, and mixed media (see the image above: Brittany Dunkle, Josephine Tarbell, Taylor Gallanger, Alexandra Firlings, John DeAngelis, Sarah Jarrar, Rebecca Holland, Emily Bethune, Audrey Waterman, Jodi Bezanson, Emily Dolloff-Holt, Shannon Hinton, Mai Openo, Olivia Guzman, and Monica Hughes).

With students' permissions, the completed canvases were displayed next to each other in the Anthropology Department (UNH). Students then were encouraged to contemplate their projects in relation to each other, finding similar themes emerging in their artwork by stitching together their fragmented identities in a dialogue with each other. In the process, students articulated the following themes: family, countries, gender, religion, significant others, food, stress, social judgment, personal transformation, complexity, cultural background, self-reflection, analogies, feelings, and personality.

When asked to reflect on this exercise, the majority responded that they found it challenging but rewarding. One student said that she "found that my experience completing my 'identity' art piece encouraged me to think about myself, as well as the people around me." Another student pointed out how much we use others and our relations with them to tell a story about ourselves; she said,

This was a thought provoking exercise because I have not tried to describe my identity through art before. Using symbols of ethnicity and culture were quite helpful, but it was still difficult to illustrate myself. Although using pictures of people who are important to me and of what I look like seemed the ideal solution, I tried to avoid this for the challenge. I used writing, color and a bird which all portrayed a personal meaning. Overall, this was a useful process in better understanding myself.

Other students observed the duality of representing how they see themselves and how they portray themselves to others. One student wrote,

At first this exercise was challenging because in order to represent myself onto a canvas, I first had to reflect on how I identify myself. I realized that to me, my identity was comprised of how I present myself to the world, or how I want the world to see me, and my true self.

Some students also noted seeing both similarities and differences between each other's canvases: "...the canvas revealed aspects of the students that I did not previously know about. Not only was this project challenging for me, but I also learned about the students in our class more." Finally, several students concluded that identity was dynamic, since it has changed overtime:

The prompt that was provided to the class isn't necessarily a question that I have never asked myself, which was what my social identity is. This exercise really pushed me to gather my contemplative thoughts that I have had about who I am and the construct of my own identity. I tried to make the end product a visual manifestation of how I see myself and the parts of my identity that I continue to redefine and grapple with. During the actual creative process, I think certain parts of myself naturally revealed themselves more than others. The interesting part about all of this is that I know if I were to be asked to complete a similar project 5 or 10 years from today, my contemplative process and the visual result of it would look completely different.

This seemingly simple exercise made students engage in deep thinking about their selves and informed the way they think about and represent others.

** Autoethnography is a research method whereby authors reflect on their personal experiences and connect them to a larger socio-cultural context.*