

**WITH PICTURES AND WORDS I CAN SHOW YOU:  
CARTOONS PORTRAY RESILIENT MIGRANT  
TEENAGERS' JOURNEYS**

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BACKGROUND TO THE DRAWING-BASED INQUIRY  
REPORTED IN THIS CHAPTER

Our research<sup>i</sup> with adolescents highlights the necessity of projecting the voices of youth in order to come to understand and share their experiences fully (Cameron & Creating Peaceful Learning Environments Team, 2002a, 2002b). Teenagers have powerful statements to make about their own situations. Their narratives are powerful: They are insightful; they are veridical; they are deeply engaging; and, most importantly, youths have stories that can inform theory and practice. In listening to the voices of youth, we have previously applied a wide range of methodological approaches (as reported in Cameron, 2004), but we have never asked youths to cartoon their experiences.

Recently, the first author collaboratively developed a methodology for the international investigation of developmental thriving that involved filming a *day in the life*<sup>ii</sup> of children in their home environments (Gillen & Cameron, 2010; Gillen et al., 2007). Subsequently, this methodology was adapted for the Negotiating Resilience Project (NRP) to accommodate the 'habitus', or socio-cultural milieu, of resilient adolescents in transition by using multiple converging methodologies: NRP community youth advocates recruited NRP teenagers for us to interview about their thriving. We filmed them for an entire *day*, they participated in a photo-voice project, and iteratively engaged in reflection on their lived experiences

This project afforded participants the opportunity to reflect on the roots of their resilience from many vantages. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) perspective of observing youth in micro- to macro-contexts informed this research by enhancing endeavours to identify the nature of their 'growing up well', their resilience, which is defined as their thriving in the face of hardship (Ungar et al., 2007). When we recruited the adolescents, we informed them they had been recommended to us as youths who were unusually well adapted and that we were interested in understanding their sources of strength, both personal and social.<sup>iii</sup>

One of our adolescent NRP participants, a female Mexican immigrant to Canada, informed us that she had participated in a community programme for immigrant youth wherein they cartooned to communicate their relocation experiences (Heraty, 2008). She shared her cartoons with us. They revealed socio-emotional and discursive aspects of her migration experiences that we had not

previously noticed or been able to appreciate. We invited her to cartoon other experiences that contributed to her resilience and she readily agreed. We then asked another of our cooperative participants, a boy in Thailand who had migrated from Bangkok to the north of his country and who was also an avid artist, if he would cartoon as well. Our analyses of the value-added information we gained from this youth expression are the subject of this chapter.

#### CARTOONING

According to McCloud (1993), cartoons, which have been around since at least 1300 BC, are “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (p. 9). McCloud reported that sequentially arranged images drawn in Egyptian antiquity were precursors to a pre-Columbian pictorial manuscript and to the Bayeux Tapestry depicting the Norman invasion of England (pp. 10–18). There has been a long and intricate history to the use of images to enhance the depiction of narratives, wherein sequences of graphic representations explicate events or experiences. Ontogenetically, children scribble and make markings before mature writing representations develop (Pinto, Accorti Gamannossi, & Cameron, 2010); primitive combinations of drawing and writing are encouraged in the education of children in their early years. Emergent readers respond enthusiastically to picture books and cartoons during their transitions to independent literacy and more accomplished graphic representational skills. An enormous body of children’s literature in such hybrid forms of written and graphic communication appeals to the interest of children and youths. McCloud (1993) acknowledged the somewhat restricted domains captured by cartoons, and their more impelling attraction for young mainstream males, and proposed, in 2000, the expansion of cartooning genres to attract a broader diversity of interested readers and creators.

We note, but do not explore, discussions of whether cartoons are a ‘low’ or ‘high’ form of art, and we observe that there is a current upsurge in interest in their analysis as expressive media reflecting political observation, ethnic representation, gender balance, genre diversity, life narratives, and humour (Gordon, 2003; McCloud, 2000, 2006; Shaw, 2007). Cartooning as a literary and artistic form of autobiographical reflection is increasingly noted and lauded. We will not examine the developing skills of young children either to comprehend cartoons (Takahashi & Sugioka, 1988; Sobel & Lillard, 2001) or produce them. In fact, there is a paucity of research on children’s cartoon productions, even though cartooning is a favourite activity of many children and youths and deserves further exploration.

‘Autographics’ or richly illustrated sequential graphical and verbal productions have become popular mechanisms for representing adult ‘life journeys’ (Hui, 2009; Watson, 2008). Integrating illustrations and text creates powerfully direct communications media that appeal to an increasingly large audience. Tackling difficult topics not easily addressed in either words or pictures alone is rendered

less onerous by the combination of the two communication channels (Macias, Wilson, Hui, & Heyman, 2010).

The goal of this chapter is to examine how two youths give voice in cartoons to their experiences of surpassing challenges. We seek to achieve a deeper understanding of the transitional experiences of these youth by involving them integrally in joint representations of their experiences. We expected our encouragement of cartooning to afford the youths an opportunity to reveal their perceptions while reflecting on their lives.

### *The Journeys of Idzel and Pond*

We turn now to the cartoons produced by the two participants.

*Idzel in Canada.* Idzel was 14 years old when she was introduced to us as a middle school student who was doing well in her new community in spite of certain radical changes in her life circumstances. Idzel and her family (maternal grandmother, mother, father, and her younger sister) had recently emigrated from Mexico to Canada with support from the Mormon Church. None of the family members spoke English confidently on arrival, and it was the Mormon community who scaffolded many family needs, both practical and spiritual. Further, the family protected Idzel and her sister from many of the immigration status insecurities they were facing.

*Idzel's cartooning.* Idzel indicated that she was keen to illustrate for us her experience of becoming a Mormon young woman.<sup>iv</sup> She had told us during discussion of her *day* that she is expected to rise at 05:30, five mornings a week, in order to take part in the Mormon studies for girls between the ages of 15 and 18 years, which provide precepts to help them enact their faith. In her cartooning reflections, Idzel indicated finding that those religious studies increasingly enhance her religious practices, providing her with comportment guides on how to make "good decisions". She said that those decisions made her happy.

Initially, she indicated not knowing how to draw faces and thought that this put her work at a disadvantage. She was concerned that her individual frames might not fit together as a cohesive narrative. Her own favourite cartoons are *Garfield*, *Peanuts*, and *Calvin and Hobbes*, and she reflected that even though her narrative would not be as funny as these, she would not want to produce cartoons that were not at least somewhat engaging. She reported seeking her mother's advice on how to frame the vignettes so as to represent personal challenges while maintaining the interest and sympathy of the reader.

Once she had her narrative strategy in place and reassurance that figurative skills were not as important as the underlying message, she reported being fine to proceed, genuinely wanting to share her stories of learning to be a Mormon young woman with a wide audience:

I would not draw a [cartoon] if it is not something that is important to me but I do not want it to be boring. If people read it and understand it, it will be worth it. They might think, “Being a Mormon is difficult” as a first impression, but then, if they think, “she must have a good reason if she can go through all that”, [her goal would be accomplished].

In a sense, this suggests transformation of Idzel’s personal struggles into social/political action. She proceeded to depict in her cartoons 4 *days in her life* during which she is subjected to a range of interactions in which her personal practices (grounded in Mormonism) are misunderstood: Thursday and Friday in school and Saturday and Sunday at home and out and about. When we interviewed her, Idzel reflected on her experience of her peers seeing her as unusual and reported not minding being thought “weird”. She drew the line, however, at what she sees as ignorant derision directed toward her religion. For example, when she chooses to make “good decisions”, she does not mind if classmates deride her. However, if they say negative things about her church (for example, a teacher said in class that members of her church were polygamists and not Christian), she becomes distressed (Gordon, 2003).

In her first cartoon, “Thursday” (see Figure 15.1), Idzel depicts her early rise to attend her seminary class. The opening frames of religious instruction serve as a backdrop and set the stage for the ensuing cartoons. She shows herself proceeding to school where she resists temptation to skip classes as invited by her classmates to do. Later in the day, she refuses a free cup of coffee saying that she only puts healthful substances into her body, in keeping with her Mormon beliefs.



Figure 15.1. “Thursday”: The experiences of a young Mormon woman.

Idzel shows, via a “Friday” cartoon, her physical education class in which her teacher misattributes extra credits to her. She confesses to her teacher that she deserves four not six points, maintaining integrity even if her classmates do not comprehend her need to do so. Later in the day, Idzel defends her decision to not have burned songs sent from her friends for her birthday party to a CD because they contained ‘inappropriate’ content.

In her “Saturday” cartoon, Idzel shops for a dress for her birthday party with her mother and sister. Four hours and 70 stores later, they find a dress that is not too short and that has no immodest touches. She observes in an aside text bar that shopping is sometimes difficult as it is hard to find clothes that are appropriately modest. After shopping, she goes to a local community centre and strives to seek out companions who do not use coarse language. She returns home to watch TV but turns it off at midnight so as to observe the Sabbath with piety. In “Sunday”, Idzel attends Sunday school, where her efforts of the week are reinforced. She spends the rest of the day with her family as can be seen in [Figure 15.2](#).



Figure 15.2. “Sunday”: The Sabbath day of a young Mormon woman.

Idzel, in depicting examples of her standing tall in spite of possibly being misunderstood, reported taking pride in defending what she believes in, emphasising how many of her church friends do not admit in school that they are Mormons due to fear of derision. However, she feels strongly that so long as classmates only see her as “weird” she is strong enough to tolerate that: It is a small price to pay for enacting the principles that guide her life.

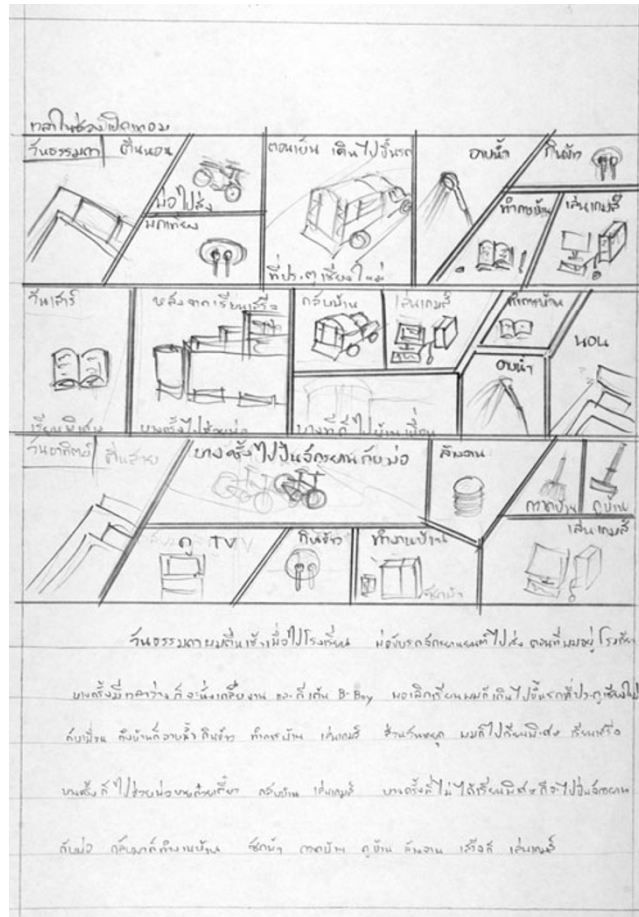
She does not explicitly depict some of these subtle reflections in the cartoons; these reflections were the result of nuanced exchanges between researchers and artist and not previously explored without her comic strips as prompts. Further, she reported vacillating between concern that readers might either not understand her message that these small indignities are worth the price of peer alienation, thus creating an overly empathetic reaction that she would not welcome, or perceive the slights to be so trivial as not worth mentioning. Unless one is a Mormon, she feels, one may not really understand.

*Pond in Thailand.* Pond was 13 years old when we first interviewed him. He lived in Chiang Mai, Thailand, with his father at the time; he had been in that northern capital only for 3 to 4 months. The move had been difficult for Pond since his mother and older sister still lived in Bangkok. Pond's artist father had opened a noodle shop in Chiang Mai to support the family, but he also encouraged Pond to spend time each week exercising his considerable graphic skills.

Pond sketched for 1 hour during the filmed *day* of observation, using sketchpads, graphite, and a straight edge ruler, copying from books of traditional Thai drawings. He reported being interested in cartooning and had many models to use, some of which included English text. He reported reading cartoons, when not playing video games, and accepted with alacrity our invitation to cartoon about his daily experiences.

Through his cartooning, Pond confirmed concretely that what we witnessed during the filmed *day* could be deemed the significant routines of his daily landscape. He could have sketched stylised Thai themes or cartoon action characters that he draws on a regular basis and could have ignored the mundane activities of his days, but instead, he not only enacted his values in showing us his daily routines when we filmed his *day* but also showed that these activities are enduring and noteworthy as cartoons that reflect the strengths of his daily life.

See [Figure 15.3](#) for Pond's 'regular day' cartoon. At the start (in the first row), he wakes up (bed/pillow) and then his father takes him to school (motorcycle). A plate, a fork, and a spoon depict lunch break. He buses home from Chiang Mai Gate. At home he showers (showerhead), eats (plate/fork/spoon), does homework (notebook and pencil), and plays games (computer). On Saturday (see the second row), there is a tutoring class (book). After class, Pond helps his dad (noodle shop), returns home (bus), plays games (computer) and sometimes goes to a friend's house, then does homework (notebook), showers (showerhead), and goes to bed (bed/pillow). On Sunday (see the third row), he gets up (bed/pillow), sometimes goes biking with his father (bicycle), watches TV (television), eats (plate/fork/spoon), does homework (unclear), washes dishes (stack of plates), sweeps the house (broom), mops the floor (mop), and plays games (computer).



The text at the bottom of the page elucidates the three rows of pictures:

On schooldays, I get up early to go to school. Dad takes me to school on his motorcycle. While at school when I have some free time, I try to clear away my work and practice B-Boy Dance. After school, I walk with my friends to Chiang Mai Gate to get on a bus. Upon arriving home, I shower, eat, do my homework, and play games. During weekends, I go to special tutoring class. After class, I sometimes go to help my dad sell noodles, then go home, play games. Some days, when I don't have to go to tutoring class, I go biking with my dad. I do homework when I return home, do my laundry, sweep, and mop the floor, wash the dishes. After finishing my chores, I play computer games. (English translation)

In Figure 15.4, Pond depicts holiday *days in his life*. (Many images are common to the ‘regular day’ cartoon pictured in Figure 15.3.) At a nearby temple, hungry dogs abound as represented in the middle of the second row of the following cartoon. Pond’s father encourages his son to take scraps from the noodle parlour to feed them. They enact Buddhist values of compassion and respect for living things routinely in this daily ritual.

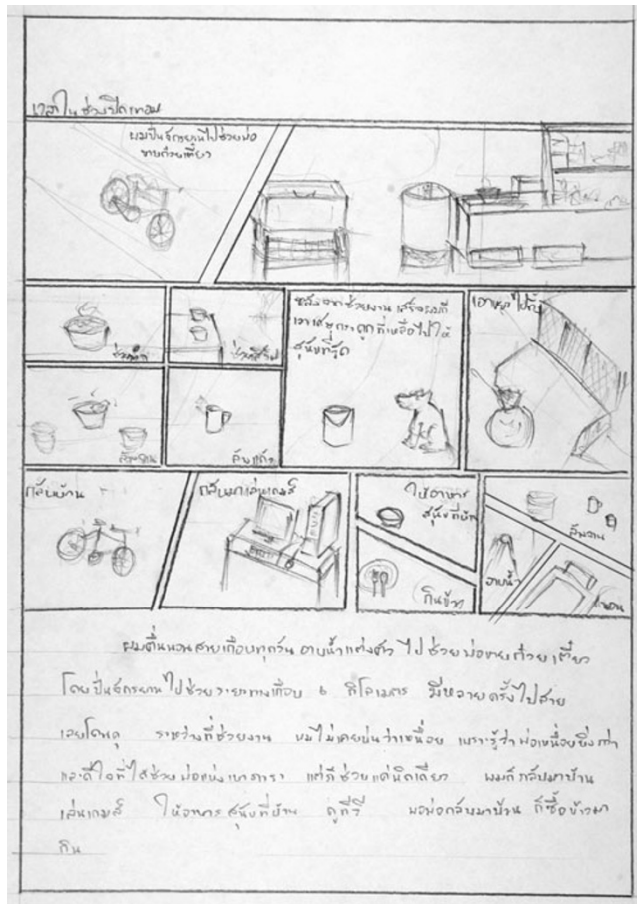


Figure 15.4. Pond’s holiday day script.

Pond’s drawings and texts are veridical, careful, and almost architectural. He drew the frames and gutters of his cartoons with precision and innovation (some gutters were drawn diagonally to accommodate all the ideas he wanted to incorporate), and it was clear that he had worked out in advance how to fit everything into the days’ cartoons.



Pond's cartooning reflects his enduring dedication to his home life. He details the minutiae of his days—from mopping the floor and disposing of the garbage to serving noodles and washing up afterwards to taking a shower and reading cartoons and playing on his computer. His reflections on his cartoons leave no doubt that his routines are a source of some comfort to him in this transitional period of his life.

## CONCLUSIONS

### *Cartoons Contributing to Theory*

From a theoretical perspective, teen expressions are critical to the development of an understanding of teenagers' 'habitus' or natural mode of life (Goodnow, 1997, 2002). If we are to know youth in the many roles they wish to share with us, or on the many levels on which they operate, reflective interviews, photo elicitations, and filmed *days in their lives* are all rich contenders for grounded theoretical analyses, but the value added from cartooning opens unprecedented doors for extended reflections, complementing our existing lengthy engagement with these youths. Encouraging this sort of exchange provides a welcome forum that enlists deeper practical and theoretical insights.

Despite the relative brevity of the cartoons, several themes instrumental to the understanding of doing well in the face of adversity emerge in the cartoons and in the reflective discussions following the production of the cartoons. Themes of religious pride and allegiance to rigorous moral and cultural codes, along with dedication to home life, become vivid. Although the NRP findings depict (among others) traditional cultural values and strengths (Theron, Cameron, Lau, Didkowsky, & Mabitsela, 2009), the place of cultural pride and human capital in youths' perceptions of their own resilience (Brooks, 2009, 2010), emotional security (Cameron, Tapanya, & Gillen, 2006), and the protective functions of family responsibilities (Didkowsky, 2010), cartoons embellish these themes in graphic reflection.

Our very outgoing participating youth, Idzel, took us, in her cartoons, outside the frameworks she had created in her interviews, photographs, and filmed *day*. She provided us with a rather individualistic landscape of personal thoughts and emotions about the challenges her religious precepts posed to the development of her femininity and about her courage in being different from her school peer group. Pond, who was more reserved, focused on externals that could reflect a collectivist perspective. His care and attention to his detailed cartooning as well as his inclusion of more information than he knew we had previously obtained provided a forum for dissemination to a wider audience. The cartooning choices of these teenagers brought new dimensions to the pictures we were framing of them and encouraged our belief that we should listen to their perspectives in many media but perhaps especially when they had a chance to engage with words and pictures together.

*Cartooning as Methodology*

After examining and discussing the cartoons of these two resilient youths, we see that there are distinctly different graphic approaches that teenagers might take when asked to create cartoons, but whichever paths they choose, these artefacts of their contemplations enhance both their and our reflections on their strengths. Idzel's cartoons afford glimpses of the inner terrain of her experiences played out in emotionally vivid dialogues, captions, and sketches. The small dramatic incidents afford us insight into the trials she faces more vividly than words or pictures alone could do. Cartooning the challenges she faced in confronting the gap between what she wished to express as a developing Mormon young woman and what she was prepared to tolerate in social disrespect generated for Idzel and for us valuable information on her sophisticated insights into these challenges: Accepting a personal slight is different from accepting attacks on her church. Further, she carefully considered how to develop a cartoon that presented her challenges in the light she wanted, exposing her metacognitive and social awareness of the importance of portraying her faith practices in a favourable yet truthful light. In Pond's case, his cartooning was less emotive and more documentary; he chronicled the details of his daily routine with precision and care. He gave expression to the emotional security that his daily routine conveys in this close attention to detail.

In both instances, reflective discussions deepened the meaning embedded in their cartoons. The interview we held with Idzel added rich information to our interpretation of the visual material. It was, further, the source of increased appreciation of the depth of her contemplations of her roles in her family as a faithful child; her roles with peers, as an atypical teen but one admired for her strength of character; and her interactions with some teachers who ridiculed her religious allegiances. She said of cartooning: "I have to search into my life."

In the case of the not so loquacious Pond, it is interesting to note that he was more verbally responsive when we asked him to describe and reflect on his cartoons than when we invited him simply to talk about his filmed *day*. This might have related to his pride in his graphic skills: When we asked him to draw and comment on his cartooning, he was carefully but much more richly informative. For example, in reflecting on his drawings, he verbalised his hesitation about complaining to his father about work: He reported that he felt that his father was more entitled to complain of exhaustion than he was. During his reflections on his cartoons, Pond emphasised his respect for what his father sacrifices for the family in their noodle shop.

The value of the reflective interviews suggests that although the cartoon products themselves are of interest for their integrative contents and dedication to communicate important life narratives, they are also perhaps even more valuable as engagements in the construction process, eliciting reflections that lie beneath a simple expression of an experience. The drawings and texts were just the beginning; the teenagers' descriptions of the roots of their scenarios were equally rich as they afforded informative nuances and alternative views.

A possible caveat to using cartooning as a method of generating data is that we worked with youths who took pride in their drawing and who were greatly interested in reading cartoons. Although the youths chose different graphic technical approaches, they both most willingly engaged in the activity. It would be unwise to expect that youth who are less comfortable with these media might find this as enjoyable an activity or one so easy to complete.

Despite her proclivity for cartooning, Idzel sought reassurance that the quality of her drawing was secondary to its communicative value. This suggests that researchers should be sensitive to putting youth who engage in drawing activities at ease, even when participants enjoy comics and are familiar with drawing as a medium of expression.

Our participants also clearly sought feedback on their artistic and storytelling skills. They valued appreciation of their efforts. The youths were keen not just for us to reflect on the work they did but to make sure that others would see their cartoons and gain an appreciation of lives like theirs. This should remind researchers that visual data deserve more popular dissemination. Both participants were not only happy to share their work for this chapter but were willing to have the cartoons go on display so a wider audience might grasp the tenor of their lives. They felt it would be exciting to have exhibitions or poster sessions displaying a wide variety of comic strips that reflected the various particularities of the mundane but that also showed the daily rounds of other such resilient teenagers. We agree and feel that their unique reflections, which are at the same time common reflections of indomitability, would be informative.

### *Final Thoughts*

Both the act of cartooning and reflecting on this act encouraged deeper understanding of our participants' resilience: It was a forum for our participants to express, richly, perspectives on their lived experiences. When they had trouble finding words for an experience, they could represent it graphically, and when they felt they could not draw something, they used words.

Of course, cartooning would not appeal to all teenagers, but since cartoons are so widely appreciated by many youths, it would be of some value to explore further the potential of using this method to elicit narratives that remain as yet untold.

Their artefacts, and reflections on them, would both provide additional valuable knowledge for our information set from a divergent perspective and offer a new methodology, a revealing standpoint on these teenagers' experiences and their sensitive perceptions of them.

### NOTES

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- grateful to the participating teenagers without whom we could not have conducted this research so satisfactorily. Corresponding author: Catherine Ann Cameron, Department of Psychology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, V6T 1Z4, acameron@psych.UBC.ca.
- ii The words ‘day in the life’ and variations of this formulation such as ‘day’ are italicised when they are used to describe participants’ actions and experiences as well as events that were captured on video during the application of this specific visual methodology.
  - iii Locally determined institutional ethical approvals were obtained with particular respect to the potentially invasive visual methodologies and the anticipation of some 20 hours of voluntary teenager participation.
  - iv She was simply asked to depict her experiences as cartoons and was given a month to create the cartoons. We visited her once to see her work in progress, and a second meeting involved a detailed discussion of her cartoons, primarily obtaining her reflections on her goals and on the processes she had drawn upon in enacting the productions.

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