PERCEPTIONS OF THE UNITED STATES AND THE AMERICANS. THE COLLAGE APPROACH

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Abstract – National and regional stereotypes are difficult to study in a practical manner. The Collage method, an experimental method for descriptive research material analysis, was designed to that end. It was first tested in a seven-nation survey of college and university students, on the sociotype of the United States and its typical inhabitants. Among the samples the one collected in Spain (Pais Vasco) was more critical and sometimes more realistic in its perceptions than the rest. The criticism focused on the US way of life and especially on the nation's role in world politics. The positive aspects of the love-hate relationship with the USA were mostly projected on the typically American female, whereas the male represented the majority of negative connotations. For the students, the typical USA was located on the West Coast, in California. The perceptions were clearly influenced by US media entertainment, in addition to more factual news media information.

Keywords: Collage method, regional image, stereotype, ethnicity, the media, USA, Spain.

Resumo – PERCEPÇÕES DOS ESTADOS UNIDOS E DOS AMERICANOS. O MÉTODO DE COLAGEM. Existem problemas de ordem prática no estudo de estereótipos nacionais e regionais. Para resolver esta questão recorreu-se ao método de colagem, uma ferramenta experimental para a análise de documentos de pesquisa de natureza descritiva. O método foi primeiro testado em sete amostras de alunos universitários, inquiridos sobre os Estados Unidos e sobre tipos de características sociais dos seus habitantes. Entre as amostras a mais crítica, e porventura a mais realista, foi a dos alunos da região basca, em Espanha. As suas apreciações críticas centraram-se no estilo de vida dos habitantes dos Estados Unidos e especialmente no papel deste país na política mundial. Nessa relação de amor-ódio os aspectos positivos diziam respeito sobretudo às mulheres, reservando-se para os homens a maioria das conotações negativas. Para os estudantes, o cidadão típico americano vive na Califórnia. As percepções foram claramente influenciadas por programas de entretimento dos media e secundariamente por outras informações factuais dos meios de comunicação social.

Palavras-chave: Método de colagem, imagem regional, estereótipo, étnico, media, Estados Unidos, Espanha.

Résumé – Perceptions des Etats-Unis et des américains. La méthode du collage. Il existe des problèmes d'ordre pratique dans l'étude des stéréotypes nationaux et régionaux. Pour les résoudre, on a eu recours à la méthode de collage, un outil expérimental servant à l'analyse de documents de recherche de nature descriptive. La méthode a été tout d'abord testée sur sept échantillons d'étudiants universitaires, interrogés sur les États-Unis et sur le type de caractéristiques de ses habitants. Parmi ces échantillons, le plus critique, qui se trouve être aussi le plus réaliste, a été celui des étudiants de la région basque, en Espagne. Leur appréciation critique s'est basée sur le style de vie des habitants des États-Unis et spécialement sur le rôle de ce pays dans la politique mondiale. Dans cette relation amour-haine, les aspects positifs concernent surtout les femmes, réservant aux hommes la majorité des connotations négatives. Pour les étudiants, le citadin américain typique vit en Californie. Les perceptions ont été clairement influencées par des programmes de divertissements médiatiques, ainsi que par d'autres informations factuelles provenant des moyens de communication sociale.

Mots-clés: Méthode de collage, image régionale, stéréotype ethnique, média, États--Unis, Espagne.

I.   INTRODUCTION

Strong national images exist and are often referred to, but are seldom actually studied in detail despite their effect on our perceptions of the world, of ourselves and of international relations (e.g. Pritchard, 2000; Santos and Buzinde, 2006; Caton and Santos, 2009). More often than not, these images remain stereotypic for a good reason. We are unable to grasp the full diversity of the world and therefore tend to rely on generalizations. The gaps in our knowledge, large and small, are filled with imagination and exaggerations in order to create the full picture we mentally crave. The resulting stereotypic categorizations of other regions and their inhabitants provide an illusory sense of complete understanding, order and stability – a reassuring perception of being in control (Hottola, 1999: 306).

Individual stereotypes in connection to social groups are very interesting (Pickering, 2001; Schneider, 2004). Citizens of a particular nation may have a historically specific way to categorize their neighbouring and faraway nations. In some cases, a national stereotype may be shared by those who stereotype and those who are stereotyped, the consensus creating a particularly strong image called sociotype, or a social stereotype (e.g. Gannon, 1994). The strength of the consensus varies depending on who is stereotyped by whom and when.

After World War II (WWII), one national image above all others has pervaded on the minds of global audiences: the United States of America (USA). The US were part of the coalition forces that won the war and the Americans exported their culture worldwide during the subsequent cold war competition over the souls of the people after the coalition had split into the East and the West. With its worldwide media and market presence, the western power sold its cultural traits to other nations, thereby creating a rather strong national image: a hegemonic group stereotype (Schneider, 2004; Caton and Santos, 2009: 191; Hottola, 2012).The entertainment media and

consumer brands, such as Coca Cola, mediated the imagery with inbuilt guidelines for interpretation at the receiving end.

In order to find out the current sociotype of the United States and the Americans, groups of 22 to 40 (total of 220) college and university students were surveyed in seven European, Asian, African and North American nations during the first decade of 2000. These included the country that was stereotyped i.e. the United States (Davis, California), Finland (Joensuu), Spain (Vitoria-Gasteiz), Zambia (Kitwe), South Africa (Durban), Sri Lanka (Kandy) and Japan (Kansai). The forms were available in English, Spanish and Finnish. Overall, 44 percent of the respondents were men and 56 were women. There was a significant gender bias in three samples. In the USA, 3 men and 24 women completed the questionnaire, whereas the Japanese sample numbers were 2 and 20, respectively. In Spain, male respondents dominated with 23 men and 11 women.

The conclusive results of the general survey have already been published as a sociotypic collage, an analysis of a consensus between the seven samples (Hottola, 2012). However, the combined results were not the only interesting aspect of the study. The current text focuses on the results of the Spanish sample that include 34 Geography students mainly from the University of *Pais Vasco* in Vitoria-Gasteiz, and its specific features.

II.   COLLAGE METHOD

Hottolla designed a new methodological tool, the collage method, that made it possible to effectively survey a national stereotype (Hottola, 2012). First, the respondents were requested to complete a form describing "the physical and mental characteristics of a typically American woman and man, also the typically American place where they most naturally fit in". The concepts of 'America' and 'American' were used in their narrowest sense, in reference to the United States, even though 'America' may also indicate several other nations in other contexts. Later, the respondents were requested to name the American persons who most closely fitted their descriptions and to state their opinions on the individuals they had just "created".

Only the skin colour of an American man/woman was specifically asked in the beginning of the descriptive section, as a guiding introduction to an otherwise open question on physical characteristics, dress and other qualities. In other ways, the questionnaire was open. Therefore the survey design allowed the respondents maximum freedom in their descriptions of the typical American. The freedom to write down the attributes that first came into one's mind was a strategy to concentrate the material around dominant attribute selections, the ones of primacy in the respondents' perceptive imagery. The respondents had 45 minutes to complete the written form with their descriptions. The surveys were carried out in lecture rooms, under supervision.

Afterwards, the material was organized and analysed. With very few exceptions, the students proved to be well motivated and delivered a wealth of detailed

material. The United States, as a topic, was both familiar and controversial, therefore rewarding. Consequently, the qualitative analysis, with a degree of basic quantification, produced highly detailed descriptions even in small samples. This also applied to the Spanish sample, which produced almost 2,000 descriptive attributed categories to be ranked, from which a collage was derived. The descriptive items were first categorized according to their context (e.g. jeans under 'dress', eyes under 'facial features') and then ranked according to their frequency. The same was done with each body part, dress item, character trait and the features of typically US environment.

The construction of the descriptive textual collage of the stereotype, the iconic Americans and their native environment, was started by the most dominant features in the survey material, which were then complemented by top dominant features in each attributed category (more below). Next, less dominant features were selected according to their ranking order and added to the collage as long as they did not conflict with the earlier selections. The most scattered attributes, mentioned only in one paper, and the ones in contradiction with the previous selections were left out. For example, if a number of students perceived the typically American male to be a Republican, and smaller number wrote down a Democrat, only the more dominant attribute was included in the collage.

In other words, the organization of the material was based on a process of ranking and consequent inclusion or exclusion. As an example, the typically American man had brown hair (dominant colour choice in the Spanish sample, mentioned in 41 percent of the forms), which was also short (dominant length choice) and with a bald plate (less dominant hair quality choice not in contradiction with the previous ones). There was also some grey on his temples (another less dominant hair style choice). Other physical and mental qualities were ranked in a similar manner, including his typical US environment. The chain of features accumulated to a full textual description of the physical and other qualities of the stereotypic American man, woman and the United States, as perceived by the observers.

The attributes varied in each questionnaire. Not everybody mentioned hair colour at all, for example. The idea was to collect the main characterizations as chosen by the students, instead of a regular survey with a predetermined list of physical and mental characteristics, dress items and other qualities. Had the latter been done, manipulation could not be avoided. Furthermore, the inclusion of all possible variety, an unrealistic goal, would have created a very lengthy questionnaire with major difficulties in identifying genuinely dominant features. In other words, the respondents were free to decide what was important in their subjective perceptions of the USA and the Americans. Therefore, if one third of the students brought out a certain feature, it became rather significant in comparison to scattered features with minimal support in the survey.

It is important to notice that the collage method is not about statistical representativeness, but rather about ranking order. According to the ranking logic, the most dominant attributes did score high in frequency, but the least dominant attributes to

complement the collage did not need to have high scores to be accepted. Even if only four respondents out of 34 brought out a quality of hair, for example, it could be added to the collage as long as the attribute was not excluded due to conflict with already selected features. Long hair may also be curly but not crew cut. The numbers are not that important, except in the role of creating the ranking order of the attributes.

On the whole, mental images of ethnic and regional entities tend to be somewhat 'hazy in outlines' and evolving in details, even though relatively resistant in the core (Pieterse, 1992; Hottola, 2012). The gaps in knowledge are filled with less than consistent imagination. Moreover, descriptions of size and volume, for example, are articulated in different ways in each culture, often in relation to the locally prevalent average. Comparative surveys involving several nations may therefore become a challenge unless the researcher is familiar enough with them, as in the present case. There are no uniform, exact concepts across cultures.

At the end of the day, stereotypic perceptions are approximations and therefore best studied by methodological tools, which produce accurate enough understandings, in line with postmodern qualitative epistemology. By their inherent qualities stereotypes tend to defy statistical analysis to some degree and its requirements of quantitative accuracy. Therefore, a 'mongrel method' with mixed epistemologies may produce information more efficiently than a more traditional qualitative or quantitative approach. Conversely, the collage method could be an effective tool to find out the dominant attributes without manipulation (given attributes), which could then be selected as a basis of a quantitative survey, preferably in a single culture study, if so desired.

III.   DOMINANT FEATURES

Stereotypes and sociotypes are simplified images, in which both dominance and homogeneity play an important role (Pickering, 2001; Hottola, 2012). The top dominant features of the Americans, as stated and agreed by at least one third of the Spanish Basque students were as follows: The typically American male has white skin (mentioned in 95% of the descriptions), wears jeans (44%) and has short (38%) brown (41%) hair. He is tall (38%) and has a stocky body (38%). The female, on the other hand, has white skin (95%) and blond hair (53%), rounded face (41%), very large breasts (38%) and blue eyes (32%). She is also sociable (34%).

In conclusion, the stereotypic Americans could be reduced to a white couple, dressed in jeans. He has short brown hair, and is tall and stocky. She has long blond hair, a rounded face and blue eyes, extra-large breasts and has an outgoing personality. These characterizations formed the basic framework of the following collage. In the general sample, the top ranking features of the 'typical' Americans were almost identical indicating a strong sociotypic agreement (Hottola, 2012): The male was a white person (75%) with short hair (44%), dressed in jeans (50%) and a t-shirt (38%)

and had a muscular body (33%). The female was a white-skinned (77%) blond-haired (53%) person, who also wore jeans (38%). She had blue eyes (36%), extra-large breasts (33%), slender body (33%) and long hair (31%).

In comparison with the top dominant features of the American female in the other six samples (Hottola, 2012), the Spanish students put more emphasis on white skin (+18%), rounded face (+23%), XL breasts (+5%), outgoing personality (+11%) and casual clothes (+9%). Conversely, they were less in agreement with others about jeans (-17%), slender body (-7%), long hair (-28%), long legs (-6%), straight hair (-11%), skirt (-15%) and trendy clothes (-8%). The male bias in the sample may have been reflected in the Spanish views, with physical features attractive to men and exceptionally little interest in the details of hair, other than colour, or clothes (cf. the following collage). In the other samples, additional hair qualities got ratings up to 57%, but only up to 9% amongst the Spanish. Even the jeans, the first choice of clothes, scored only 21% in the sample, compared with 29-52% in the rest. In regard to hair color the Spanish students, however, were in agreement with the average of the total sample.

In the case of the American male, the features that scored high in the Vitoria-Gasteiz sample included: white skin (+10%), tall stature (+8%), brown hair (+14%) and stocky body (+18%). Conversely, the features that scored lower than average were: jeans (-6%), short hair (-6%), t-shirt (-14%), muscular body (-7%) and blue eyes (-11%). In the latter category, only the t-shirt and blue eyes stood out as significant difference, the second feature being surpassed by 'brown eyes' in the sample. The preference for stocky body is probably explained by a 'Homer Simpson effect', the desire to describe the US as fat and stupid (more below). The predominance of 'white' as a typically US skin colour is an interesting result both for the male and female American, considering the large and increasing role of Latino Americans in the United States (Barlow, 2003). Nevertheless, the Spanish students saw the typical Americans as 'white' rather than 'brown'.

In regard to the most typical American place, the everyday surroundings of the 'Americanos', the Spanish students favoured a street of a large city. They "placed" the Americans in a fast food joint, McDonalds, the epitome of a 'placeless' place (Relph, 1976). In the remaining of the seven nations survey (Hottola, 2012), the most characteristic places of scenic America were as follows: Levittown style suburbia (Finland, Zambia, and USA), beach boulevard (South Africa), beach (Sri Lanka), and university campus (Japan). By year 2000, half of the US population lived in the suburbia (Hobbs and Stoops, 2002: 33), of which Levittown (Long Island, New York) is an archetype (e.g. Kelly, 1993). The suburbs are also the stronghold of the white, non-Latino Americans (Barlow, 2003). The Spanish students chose otherwise, but their activity-based location preference did not actually exclude suburbia as home.

In the regional location category the majority, including the Spanish students, placed the typical USA on the West Coast in California (Hottola, 2012). A minority chose other locations, or had no location preference. The West Coast is the main

setting of popular US entertainment, which is internationally distributed and therefore an important source of images and perceptions of the USA. The political and economic level, the importance of the Pacific Rim and the West Coast have also recently been rising (e.g. Doyle, 2007), thereby challenging the earlier dominance of the Atlantic Coast. The latter is the administrative centre of the nation and the historical European immigration gateway to the US, including the Spanish 'discovery of America' in the Bahamas by Christopher Columbus (Cristóbal Colón).

What about the details accumulated around the now defined core of the image? The following conclusive text, the collage, is derived from the Spanish Basque sample. Each feature and wording represents 'survived' categories in the above-described process of research material ranking, with neither additions nor censorship.

IV.   THE AMERICANOS

Our American couple, with their two stocky children covered in mustard from head to toe, stand in front of McDonald´s on a street of a large West Coast city, with skyscrapers of financial corporations towering in the horizon. If one looks closely there is also a small church between the giant temples of wealth and finance. On the street, there is a long row of 'junk food joints' with their colourful billboards and the inevitable rubbish on the sidewalk. On the corner, there is a large sign for an Internet cafe and an advertisement for high quality digital equipment. Numerous small American flags decorate McDonald's. The sun is shining in the blue sky, with only a few white clouds, as it usually does in California.

The family has just come out of the burger joint and are looking for their American car. There were some suspicious characters around when the wealthy group arrived, and they had been afraid that their fine car would have been stolen while they were away. If only there was a drive-in-service available! The Americans do not like to leave their cars. Luckily they had left their dog in the car and it had been guarding the car against the ever-present crime.

Let us have a closer look at the woman of the family. The 31-year-old relatively tall (170 cm) woman has a white skin with a pinkish shade. Her quite attractive rounded Anglo-Saxon face has some delicate features, plump rosy cheeks and a slight double chin. She looks younger than her actual age. Mrs. Roseanne Americano wears heavy make up and has covered a blemish or two with powder. Her blue eyes are slightly smaller than average but beautiful nonetheless, with long eyelashes and fine eyebrows. Her small, upturned nose with cute freckles has a reddish shade because of slight sunburn.

Her mouth is small and shapely with full inviting lips, which have probably been enhanced by collagen. She smiles and shows her large, perfect and white teeth. Her above-shoulder thick and massive hair is blonde, curly and wavy, and shaped like a lion's mane. She wears a fringe and has treated her hair with hair spray. Her extravagant, golden earrings can hardly been seen under her hair.

Her body is relatively plump and curvaceous in an attractive way. She is fit, shapely and energetic, although somewhat clumsy in her movements. It is difficult to say if her figure is natural or, at least partly, a result of liposuction and plastic surgery. Her extra large breasts are round and sensual and firm, despite their impressive size, indicating enhancement by silicone implants. Her back, waist and hips are medium sized, with a round, plumpish belly and an ample round behind. Her legs are long, plump and nicely shaped, and her feet are long and well cared for. Her arms are also full and shapely and fairly long. Her well-cared hands are small and quite slim, attractive and with smooth skin, slender wrists, long fingers and fine nails. A handshake would reveal a sweaty palm.

The clothes this woman normally wears are a somewhat tasteless and an extravagant mixture of predominantly informal, casual and sporty clothes with striking colours; some are tight and revealing, others quite loose. She tries to dress more elegantly on formal occasions. She wears a yellow shirt with an elegant suit, or trousers, for work with a beautiful scarf and a high-quality purse, and carries a large black jacket in case it rains. On some occasions, she prefers to wear tight shorts or stretch pants, and may even try a mini skirt. Among her other favourite clothes are a pink, phosphorous jogging suit and a blue swimsuit for the home pool or occasional visits to the nearby beach. Whenever it gets cold, she puts on a jersey.

Right now she wears a pink T-shirt, relatively loose that fits tightly across the front because of her bust, and with a text "I love N.Y." printed over her chest. Her skin-tight jeans are grey with a black belt. On her feet, she wears sporty, white platform shoes with wedge heels with a logo of a sports company on them. Somehow, she manages to wear a pair of designer sunglasses in her massive hair. She has a golden pendant around her neck. She is holding a fresh package of French fries.

Mrs. Americano works in an office in the service sector and has time for hobbies, because a housemaid takes care of the children and the household duties. She watches television up to six hours a day, although there really is nothing worth watching, likes to eat junk food in the evenings and is also excessively preoccupied with transcendentalism.

What about her character? First of all, she has a pleasant, friendly and open personality. Roseanne Americano likes to talk and socialize with other people. She tries to please everybody and carefully follows the rules of the USA in order to maintain her position in society. On the other hand, she is a very individualistic and independent woman with a strong character who knows what she wants and is ready to do anything to reach her goals.

Nevertheless, she often appears superficial and ignorant, almost juvenile, although she maintains a feeling of cultural superiority and has no interest in other nations and nationalities. Occasionally her facade falls in social situations and we are able to witness antisocial behavior: short-tempered pompousness, as well as egotism and insensitivity. An unholy marriage of Christian religion and materialism in her values, and the consequent emotional problems, occasionally bring out neurotic and even vicious outbursts towards her fellow citizens.

On the whole, it is difficult to decide whether one likes her or not. For most of the time, she is a nice person who tries to please everybody, even if she does not really like them, and likes to make people feel comfortable in her company. What is more, she is a beauty. On the other hand, one cannot help noticing her pretentious ways, personal vanity and pompousness – her excessive need to hide her true character – not to mention her generally disgusting American lifestyles, which she (incredibly) believes to be superior to others.

Let us have a look at her white husband. He has strong handsome features, a rounded face with a suntan and some dark spots and a slight double chin just like his wife's. His cheeks are also rosy and rounded. Otherwise, he looks quite different. Mr. Homer Americano has a tired face and a slightly pretentious smile. His eyes are round, widely open, small and chestnut brown in color, with thick eyebrows. His nose is straight and relatively large. He has a large mouth with thin lips and clean, white teeth.

His ears are fairly large and not covered by his short, straight and chestnut brown hair. At the age of 35 he already has some grey hair on his temples and a bald spot on the top of his head. Nevertheless, he tries to make the most of his remaining hair with highlights and hair gel. He is quite proud of his thick down sloping moustache with pointed ends that remind us of Burt Reynolds in the 1970s. He has a one-day stubble on his face according to the latest fashion. Actually, he is quite hairy all over.

Let us take a closer look at his anatomy. This man is tall, over 180 cm, with a quite well formed muscular body. His back is wide and strong, he has very well developed pectoral muscles, and his arms are relatively slender but muscular. The hands are large although somewhat unkempt. His legs are strong and muscular – rather large but at the same time shortish and his feet are large. All in all, Mr. Americano is relatively fit despite his many unhealthy habits. Only his sloping shoulders and somewhat large beer belly with slight love handles betray his current hobbies. We cannot see the history printed on his skin: tattoos and gunshot scars hidden under his clothes.

Normally Mr. Americano wears informal and sporty brand clothes, comfortable because they are loosely fitting, but at the same time neither very elegant nor well designed. Right now he wears a smelly white T-shirt of soft fabric with a Nike logo, and a checkered shirt two sizes too large. He also has baggy blue jeans with a belt. The jeans are somewhat short, ripped on the backside and hanging a little. The upper part of his bottom would show if the shirt was not so large. He wears a clean pair of Nike jogging shoes but no socks. There is a pair of designer sunglasses in his shirt pocket, and a cross pendant around his neck. He always has something to eat in his hand, this time a hamburger. The children have more burgers in their McDonald's bags for the evening.

Occasionally, he likes to wear a jogging suit and a bandanna in order to appear sporty, a denim jacket or a jersey. When going out, he may put on a short jacket like the one John Travolta wore in the last scenes of Saturday Night Fever. At home, we

might surprise him walking around in a bathrobe. At work, in a service sector office, he is well dressed with fine and expensive designer clothes of dark colors, such as for example an Armani suit with a vest, a designer tie and a white shirt, and a long overcoat in winter. For some reason, he likes to wear a university badge on his suit. His leather shoes are always elegant, expensive and shiny.

Homer Americano is a passionate sports fan and goes regularly to the gym in order to maintain his fitness. However, his other hobbies are somewhat less healthy. He spends a lot of time watching sports on the TV , guzzles a lot of cheap beer and eats mountains of junk food while doing so. In his marriage, he is sexually impotent and his wife accuses him of being gay. Therefore he has to prove his manhood in other arenas. He likes to hunt and prefers to have secret parties with women and alcohol, in which he claims to be "single, at the moment". This does not mean that the couple would not share many interests in their lives. For example, they are both Republicans and have lobbied for George Bush in the presidential elections.

At first, Mr. Americano appears to be a rather nice and generous chap. He is a handsome and happy extrovert, relatively playful and likes to talk with others. One can also see that he is a dynamic, sporty man who works hard and fits well in any social setting, including the company of workmates. On the other hand, he can be calm and humble, a homely and even religious father of the family. One would guess that he respects humanism, because he appears to be educated.

Nevertheless, when you get to know him better his negative qualities become dominant. More than anything else Mr. Americano is very pompously self-centered and arrogant. He comes first, second, and yes, also last. Even more so than his wife, he falsely believes in the cultural and political superiority of the United States, apparently because his "education", worth little more than the university badge, has left him quite ignorant and easy to manipulate. As a sign of existing double standards, he claims not to be a racist, until the day his daughter brings home a black boyfriend.

He is a conservative Republican (something close to a fascist by European standards), which means, among other things, a high level of egotism, puritanism, stinginess, bossy behavior, negative patriotism, defensiveness and above all, a tendency for impulsive violence towards those who think differently. He does not, however, realize how blunt, boring and indifferent he actually is in the eyes of the others. As a pretentious hypocrite, Mr. Americano believes himself to be a superior husband and father, although most of his spare time is spent in rather doubtful leisure activities.

It would be possible to like him because he appears to be a nice and easygoing person; an independent guy who is easy to relate to. He is talkative, well behaved, relatively honest and educated. At the end of the day, however, one has to make a negative conclusion because it is clear that Mr. Americano thinks that he is the owner and center of the world. He is antisocial, ignorant and prejudiced against other nationalities, including the Spanish, and therefore not worthy of trust.

V.   RESISTANCE AND SEDUCTION

A collage such as this may be analyzed from a number of viewpoints. The relatively neutral top dominant features have already been discussed. It is time to have a closer look on the rest of the collage.

Similarly to all the other survey samples, the Spanish stereotype of the Americans has clearly been affected by the US popular entertainment media. The Americanos and their living environment have the generic features of many US produced sitcoms, movies, computer games and cartoons, to name a few examples. The American couple are neither realistic nor averagely US, but more like the artificially enhanced 'super-real' celebrity heroes and heroines of popular US fiction, living their hedonistic lives in the middle of wealth, unlike many ordinary Americans. Moreover, the presence of crime is exaggerated, much like in the popular television 'Law and Order' depictions of US cities.

Indicatively, the 'real-life persons' most often mentioned in the Spanish survey were Homer Simpson and Roseanne Barr (hence the names in the collage and the title of the article). The first ranking names were followed by Pamela Anderson (the number 1 ranking female preference in the total survey) and David Hasselhoff, and other similar media icons. Among the US popular media celebrities, the former couple of Linda and Terry 'Hulk' Hogan most accurately resemble the stereotypic couple in the collage, in a number of ways which are perhaps best left for the reader to deduct.

The sun is shining and the sky is blue above the wealthy West Coast with its fine cars, housemaids and high living standards. The Spanish description of the American society and the Americans is, however, not very flattering – significantly less so than the sociotypic perception of combined survey results (Hottola, 2012). Some of the criticism is based on more or less factual knowledge, the news media effect (Falkheimer, 2006), some on antipathy towards the US society and culture. Some respondents had actually visited the US as tourists and had made direct observations there.

More so than in the other collages the reality of widespread obesity (Ezzati et al, 2006) was reflected in the results. The social problems of the wealthiest nation on Earth were readily brought out in the descriptions of inequality, fear, racism and crime (cf. Furedi, 2002). There is even a hint of Mr. Homer Americano having a personal history in crime. In reality, 32.3 percent of US black males born in 2001 were likely to face incarceration during their lifetime (Bonczar 2003). The respective figures for Latinos and whites are 17.2% and 5.9%.

Also the American consumerist culture (e.g. Miles, 2006) – its materialism, vitality, hedonism, gluttony and megalomania – received a rather critical evaluation. In fact, the Americano family appears to have almost pathological contradictions between their perceived values and lifestyles (see also Kasser and Kanner, 2004). The supposedly Christian values are challenged by greed for wealth and power, for example. At the same time, the US food is labeled as junk, local dress styles as

extravagant and tasteless, and television programs as not worth watching. The US lifestyle in general is regarded as inferior, pretentious, infantile, egotistic and even disgusting. The Spanish respondents apparently perceived themselves to be culturally superior to the US.

The strongest words are directed towards the unilateralism of US geopolitics. The combination of mistaken cultural superiority, ignorance and a tendency to violent outbursts towards others was regarded indicative of the US role in the world. Particularly the Republican ideology appeared to be rather alien and threatening to the Spanish students. The survey was conducted during the George Bush presidency, before the election of Barack Obama. However, the party affiliation of the US president may not be crucial. The continuous American military operations abroad since WWII have often divided opinions domestically, but even more so between Europe and the USA. European governments have repeatedly supported US use of force against a public majority opposition (e.g. Gordon and Shapiro, 2004, 2). Consequently, bitterness has developed among the post-WWII European generations and also in Spain (Prevost, 1993). In 2004, a poll ranked Spain as the most anti-American nation in Europe, after the US invasion to Iraq and the Madrid bombings (Montaner, 2004). The results of the present survey confirm this.

An interesting dimension of the collage relates to the gendered embodiment of the Americans. The Americanos have clearly attempted to transform their bodies to meet their culturally mediated appearance ideals (Featherstone, 1982), which also appear to define them as 'typically American' in the Spanish eyes. However, the American male has not been very successful in the self-development project. There are many sardonic features in the Spanish characterization of the tired, smelly, impotent and beer guzzling 'over the hill' Homer Simpson style US masculinity. The several positive character traits and relative handsomeness are buried under a tidal wave of negative characterizations.

The positive features of the USA, on the other hand, are mostly linked to the American female who is seen as quite attractive, shapely, nice and friendly, to the point of desiring to please everybody and, on the other hand as independent and individualistic, with strong character and 'go-getter' mentality. These characterizations suggest admiration, which is however dented by her doubtful lifestyles, mental contradictions and misinformed views of the world. The American woman is, nevertheless, almost equally liked and despised, unlike the American male who is clearly condemned as hostile and untrustworthy. It is the male who carries the burden of the unpopular US foreign policies on his shoulders, rather than the female who represents the seductive dimension of the USA. Similar dualism of gender roles has also been discovered in the construction of national self-identity (e.g. Pinney, 1997).

One may suspect that the male bias of the sample explained some of the appeal of Mrs. Americano, but this dimension of the collage is actually well in line with the general survey, including the female biased Davis and Kansai samples (Hottola, 2012). Reproductive prowess is an important part of the image the US media projects to the world.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The stereotypic archetypes of entertainment media are welcome all over the world and have an important role in the ways people perceive other nations and their inhabitants (Ang, 2006; Falkheimer and Johansson, 2006; Carl et al, 2007; Kim et al, 2009). The role of the US entertainment industry is, however, rather exceptional because of its hegemonic position in global markets (Thompson, 2006; Sparks, 2007). The United States is a nation with a global media presence, which has stereotyped itself in the global conscious, including the Spanish. The media effect is very pervasive. In the postmodern era, geography students also tend to base their perceptions of the United States on television series rather than geographical education (Raento and Hottola, 2005).

It is therefore not surprising that, even people with outspoken resistance towards US-lead cultural globalization, have adopted many of its self-characterizations. The characters of the entertainment media tend to be 'larger than life' and superior to the mundane average person. They therefore fit particularly well in stereotypic exaggerations, which form clearly demarcated differences in perceptional categorizations of people and their home regions. Some features of the American image appear to be almost universally attractive as projections of unfulfilled desires in everyday life. What is missed at home is often thought to be available abroad (cf. McClintock, 1995). Fantasy attributes are more easily attached to regions away from one's empirical reality, both on the screen and in perceptive imagery. On the other hand, media information may support unwarranted generalizations. As an example, the people in US entertainment and news media have historically been dominated by white Americans (e.g. Entman and Rojecki, 2000) and the perceptions of the typically US skin color tend to follow suit.

The Spanish relationship with the USA appears to be a love-hate relationship with emphasis on criticism, much like in the witty US self-analysis that Europeans prefer to import for their local audiences: Married with Children, the Simpsons, South Park and other student favorites. Similar relationships have also been recorded in Asia (e.g. Hottola, 2002). It was the Spanish who best represented a polarizing view of an American man and a woman visible in the general sample. The positive expectations they had for the USA were mostly mediated through the woman. The description of the typical America in California, on the west coast, also included several positive attributes. On the whole, however, there was more resistance than adoption in the Spanish perceptions. The Spanish respondent created the most critical collage in the samples, in particular concerning American social values. Additionally, they were more than averagely motivated to bring the negative qualities out to ridicule the Americans.

Interpretations of the message vary but the USA is present in our consciousnesses all around the world. Its cultural traits are adopted and declined in a process of seduction and resistance. It is therefore interesting at this point in history to have some knowledge about the ways people perceive the USA and the Americans. As we

have seen, there are certain characteristics that are considered 'typically American' in the stereotypic categorization of the world. They may not be exactly correct, some of them may be almost cartoonish, but they are an effective ground for intercultural communication. It is about 'Us and Others' but also about an illusion of understanding the complexity of human and regional diversity through stereotypes. In the process, the empirical diversity tends to be reduced to its basics as measured against the information available.

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