

HUMAN: AN EXPLORATION OF THE SCIENTIFIC AND SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS THAT
INFLUENCE WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HUMAN

by

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Abstract

Theatre is a constantly evolving art form. Whereas two hundred years ago plays told the stories of the trials and tribulations of the elite ruling class, today's shows are moving toward a focus of telling truthful human stories. Pulling from the practice of verbatim theatre which uses recordings of real-life people to tell a story, this project is centered around the question of what it means to be human and what we believe to be our place or purpose in the world. I am exploring this question in a twofold manner by examining it from both an objective and subjective perspective. For the first, I am looking at the concept of humanity from a scientific perspective, looking at how physics, evolutionary biology, and sociology shape our understanding of what makes a human uniquely human. I have conducted background research in the form of literature reviews to gain a general understanding of each field's views, and followed them up with interviews with an expert in each field in order to get a more in-depth understanding.

With this knowledge, I am then taking a more subjective approach, looking at how personal identities such as gender, religion, and race and immigration shape how people understand their place in the world. This section was conducted with a series of interviews for each category, exploring how differences in each of these categories affect individual views. Once all of this was completed, I synthesized the interviews into subject specific episodes that fit together to tell a multitude of stories that explore what it means to be human, and published it as a publically accessible podcast. The goal of this project is not to answer this question, but instead to invite people to engage in the conversation and think about their own views in a new way.

Artist's Statement

I believe in the power of stories. I believe in their ability to help us understand ourselves, the world we live in, and our place within it. And in turn, I believe that stories help us develop empathy and allow us to engage with people and experiences that may be well outside of our own scope. Words are one of the most powerful tools we have as a species, and we can channel that power through stories, giving voice to those who may otherwise go unheard, shaping our collective human story. It's what fuels me as an artist and as a human being. And that's why I wanted to create a podcast exploring the different stories of humanity, finding as many different narratives as I can, learning from them, and using them to help foster new perspectives and understandings in my life and the lives of those around me.

When I entered ECU as a theatre major freshman year, I was ready to hone my skills as an artist by taking classes in voice, dance, and acting. I naively assumed my professors would have all the answers and that it was my job to merely memorize and regurgitate to find success. But after four years studying in this field, I have found that this work is much more about asking questions than finding answers. True, I spend a good deal of my time training and rehearsing to develop my instrument, but most of my time goes into trying to figure out what makes us who we are. I've learned that being a capable artist has more to do with understanding the inner workings of yourself and others than simply depicting a caricature of them.

In the professional field, casting directors are beginning to look more for authenticity and personal essence than physical type and focus on the innately unique, human quality each actor brings into the room. My research has helped me better understand who we are as humans and who I am in the process, which will increase my personal castability in the

professional world. And with understanding and insight comes the growth of empathy, which is an integral component to being an effective actor. In addition to my personal career growth, this project will help highlight the podcast as a new performance tool to tell stories to people across the world. This art form builds off the idea of focusing on the human essence by putting the emphasis on the story and oral narrative, moving away from the constraints of the human body and physical look that restrict participation in other modes of performance. Thus, this project has explored what it means to be human and shared the information in a uniquely human way, through the art of the story.

Background: Verbatim Theatre

This project is based on verbatim theatre, a form of documentary drama in which recordings of real life people are used to create characters and text for a play. Essentially, this takes the practice of storytelling, or oral narrative, from a larger collective of people and combines them into a coherent plotline with dramatic structure, shaping individual stories to convey a larger theme. While the presence of reality in theatre has been used for centuries, verbatim theatre goes one step further, emphasizing vernacular speech and strict adherence to exact quotes and first-person sources. And because the audience knows that what they are viewing is not only based in truth but are actual people's personal stories, these works often have a larger impact.

This practice took hold in the 1970s with the rise of portable recording technology, namely the cassette recorder, and my project extends this practice by using new technology, the podcast, to continue to collect stories and disseminate them to a broad audience. While a podcast is not a traditional performance source in the way that staged productions are, it uses

dramatic structure and a narrative arc, characters in the form of the individuals I will be interviewing, and shares human stories with an audience which, at the end of the day, is the purpose of theatre. (Verbatim)

Research Stage

The first stage of this project was focused on research. I knew that I wanted to explore both scientific and cultural factors that affect how we define humanity, so I set about determining six topics to focus on. For the science portion, I pulled from the hierarchy of sciences, settling upon physics, biology, and sociology, so that each week the exploration would move from a macroscopic to a progressively microscopic field of study in terms of the scale of the universe and life on Earth. For the culture episodes, I researched both anthropologically significant cultural factors in society and current cultural issues in the United States. This led me to focus on the influence of gender, race and immigration, and religion.

In order to be able to conduct interviews on each of these six topics, I knew that I would need a general basis of understanding and knowledge. To that end, I began doing research at Portland State University's library, online through various library databases, and at local bookstores, just to see the kinds of information available to me, and to begin to amass note sheets for each topic. The full list of resources used to create the podcast are available in the Bibliography and are sorted by episode in the descriptions on the direct podcast website included in Appendix C.

Interview Stage

Now that I had a better understanding of each of the six topics I planned to focus on, I began to craft my interview questionnaires. Over the course of my research for the science

episodes, I began to gravitate to a few scientists whose work I felt touched on the kinds of subjects I wanted to address in my podcast, namely those who integrated a philosophical context into their work. So, in crafting the questionnaires, I began to tailor the questions to their work specifically rather than the scientific field as a whole. For the culture episodes, however, I began to take a slightly different approach. I realized that I wanted to be able to focus on people's personal stories rather than on the anthropological significance of the topics themselves, so I compiled a list of questions for each topic that I was genuinely curious about and that I thought would lead to interesting conversations.

Once the questionnaires were all completed, I moved into the next phase of my project: contacting potential interview subjects. I had already decided upon the scientists I wanted to contact in the research stage, so the main focus of this phase was finding people to interview for the culture episodes. I started by listing out everyone I knew who could talk on each topic, and then reached out to friends and family to see if they knew anyone who would be a good fit and willing to help. From there, I selected individuals with different backgrounds so that for the religion episode, for example, I would interview people who identified as Christian, Jewish, and Muslim, as opposed to three people of the same faith. Once I had a final list of twelve names, I emailed each of them and shortly thereafter received positive responses, subsequently scheduling skype interviews with each of them.

Since I was conducting these interviews from the point of view of a journalist or storyteller as opposed to a researcher, my mentor and I felt that my work did not require IRB approval. However, I wanted to make sure that everyone was aware of their rights as a participant in my project, so I crafted an Interview Disclosure Agreement (Appendix B) and

made sure that each person understood their involvement and agreed to the terms of participation. Once all of that had been established, I interviewed each individual using the respective questionnaire for their topic, and recorded the full interviews on my phone.

Production Stage

With all of the interviews in hand, I then had to set about the task of actually crafting a podcast. I spent a few weeks researching sound editing software and podcast webhosts in order to understand the technical requirements of the project. I eventually settled on using iMovie to edit the podcast because I was familiar with the software and would have consistent, reliable access to it throughout the process, and Buzzsprout as on my online server to host the finished product.

The first step in creating each episode was to develop a script. This allowed me to craft a through line for each topic and provide necessary context both for the information contained in the episode, and how that information pertained to the wider goal of understanding what it means to be human. I also wanted to make sure that the episodes were interesting and had personality so that people would be genuinely interested in listening. In addition to creating scripts for the six topic areas, I also wrote an introduction and conclusion episode in order to give the podcast a narrative arc, letting listeners know what I was trying to achieve and providing a chance for reflection at the end.

Once the scripts were completed, I moved into editing the sound files into eight complete episodes. For the most part, I used interviews in their entirety in order to maintain the integrity of the participant's story, only cutting out sections that were repetitive, unrelated to the subject at hand, or contained long pauses or audio disruptions. The three science

episodes ended up being around 17 or 25 minutes, as they contained only one interview per episode, while the three culture episodes ended up between 45 and 60 minutes, as they each contained three interviews per episode. As a final touch, I found music available through the public domain to include in each episode to help set the tone, frame the different sections of the episode, and give the podcast a polished, professional sound.

The last step of this process was officially publishing the podcast and disseminating it to a public audience. I created cover art and uploaded each episode onto my specific website on Buzzsprout (Appendix C). Along with each sound file, I included a list of resources for each of the six content episodes so that listeners could continue my research on their own if they felt compelled to learn more. Finally, I submitted my podcast to Apple Music for approval, and was subsequently published on the Apple Podcast platform. As of April 27, 2019, over 150 people have listened to one or more episodes of my podcast “Human”.

Closing

We are all incredibly interconnected. We want to help each other. We want to learn, and grow, to expand our horizons. We want to be a part of something bigger than ourselves, to love and be loved, to find friends, and find meaning in our lives. Like I said in the beginning, the goal of this project was not to answer what it means to be human. I don't think there's any one right answer. Instead, I think in the process of exploring the question deeply, we become a little more human ourselves, learning to see each other not for our labels but for the unique stories that make each of us who we are.

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