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# Cultural diversity in children's television

## Media analyses of programmes and effective strategies

**Media analyses of international and German children's TV show that there is still ample room for "diverse" characters and stories. Children experience diversity in their daily lives. They should find this local diversity reflected on television.**

The world children are growing up in today is diverse. Alongside the cultural diversity which has evolved historically, diversity also arises through migration. Do we see this diversity reflected in children's TV? Or is there the tendency to homogenization (see McMillin in this issue)? What are effective strategies for representing cultural diversity in children's TV, in characters and storylines?

### How diverse is children's TV?

In many regions of the world, children's TV is dominated by "white" characters (cf. Ill. 1). This is one of the results of a quantitative media analysis of fictional children's TV from 24 countries (Götz et al., 2008). Judging from the diversity in skin colour, the answer is: Programmes are not as diverse as the children in front of it watching it!

"White" TV characters outweigh diverse characters also in parts of the world where white-skinned people do not make up the majority of the

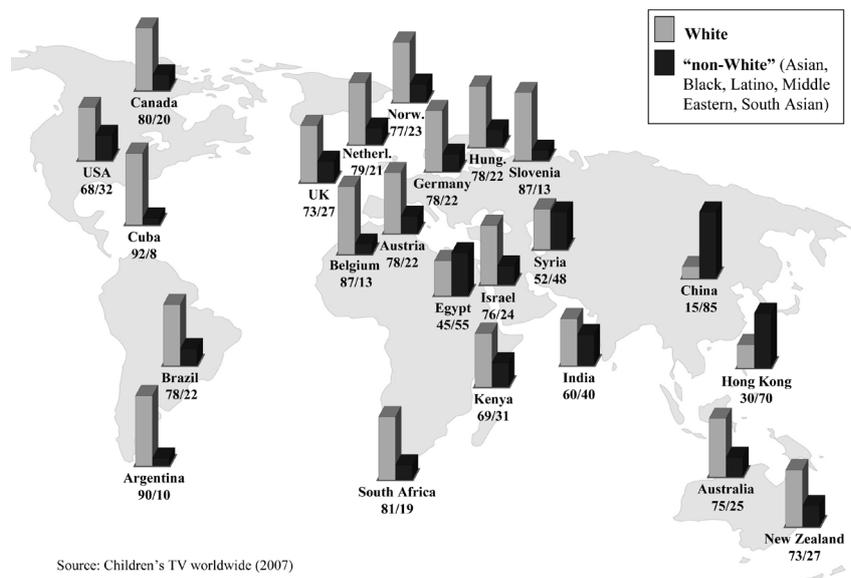
population. The difference between the diversity in the local population and that in children's TV is particularly obvious in Latin America and Africa.

In Brazil, for example, only about 50 % of the population describes itself as "White".<sup>1</sup> But 78 % of the characters appearing in children's TV are white. In South Africa, black people from various ethnic groups make up 80 % of the population, while only 10 % are white.<sup>2</sup> Children's TV shows the reverse: here 81 % of characters are White. Only in Asian countries such as China/Hong Kong white characters, in keeping with real life, are clearly in the minority (cf. Ill. 1).

In most of the 24 countries, the majority of children's TV programmes are imported. Thus the individual

countries have few domestic productions tailored to the local situation, representing their own ethnic diversity. The biggest export region of children's TV programmes is North America with 60 % of the worldwide production (Götz et al., 2008, p. 5). This means that many children in different countries, watching their own TV, become familiar with ethnic mix typical for the US and Canada.

As media analyses show, US children's TV represents the ethnic diversity which arises as a result of the different population groups (Götz et al., 2008; Akerman et al., 2008). As far as external features go, representation is in proportion to social reality: according to the US Census, 31 % of the population is "non-White". Götz et al. found that 32 % of characters



Source: Children's TV worldwide (2007)

Ill. 1: Ethnic diversity in children's TV in 24 countries: Skin colour (in %)

	<b>Winx Club</b>	<b>Totally Spies</b>	<b>Bratz</b>	<b>W.I.T.C.H.</b>
<b>W H I T E</b>	 Stella: "I love wearing the latest fashion and make sure I always look the best!"	 Clover: „A shopping-addicted, boy crazy teenage fashionista“	 Cloe: stylish diva, "drama-mama"	 Cornelia: "She loves shopping and being fashionable."
	<b>B L A C K / D A R K</b>	 Layla: "She has a restless, rebellious, and wild nature. Good athlete."	 Alex: excels in athletics	 Sasha: hip hop street style, attitude

Ill. 2: Clustering screenshots of *Totally Spies*, *W.I.T.C.H.*, *Winx Club* and *Bratz* main characters: different or the same?

in children’s TV were ethnically diverse (cf. ill. 1). Akerman et al. analysed 8,000 characters and found 24 % were “non-White”: 14 % were Black, 5 % Asian and 5 % Hispanic. The under-representation can be explained by the low number of Hispanic characters on TV in comparison to reality.

This representation of social reality is first and foremost a “diversity of looks”. Diverse skin colour is only one aspect of quality in characters. This kind of diversity is sometimes only external and superficial. For example, when programme-makers’ strategy is simply to assemble groups of characters with different skin colours:

**Ethnically diverse supergirls?**

The animated series *Totally Spies*, *W.I.T.C.H.*, *Winx Club* or *Bratz* are highly successful among the target group of 6- to 13-year-olds. At the centre of each programme are strong teenage girls banding together with their friends to save the world, fight crime or do battle against evil, be it in magical alternative universes or in the urban fashion business. But the characters lack genuine diversity, since the same attributes are repeatedly linked with a certain stereotypical appearance. There is always a fair-skinned, blond protagonist focused on shopping and her looks. Her dark-skinned/black partner is always an athlete or dancer (cf. Ill. 2). To signalize “individuality”, attributes are simply ac-

**Truly diverse ensembles**

When creating diverse characters and groups of characters, an option is to avoid choosing a clearly identifiable “ethnic appearance”. The animated children’s series *Gloria und ihre Familie (Gloria’s House)*, for example, depicts particularly well-differentiated characters who do not match an ethnic prototype. There are hardly any two characters with the same skin colour or general appearance (cf. Ill. 3). This highly individualized depiction ties in with the actual diversity of real people’s looks. Everyone looks different! This opens up space for interpretation and for a variety of ways of connecting to the text.

**How can we recognize diversity?**

What exactly is diversity in characters, beyond a “different” appearance? What options do we have for

<b>natio-</b>	nationality, country of origin
<b>ethno-</b>	language, name, clothing, skin colour, appearance, ethnic background
<b>cultural</b>	religious affiliation, attitudes, customs

} National and ethnic markers overlap, e.g. in a “national language”

Tab. 1: National, ethnic and cultural aspects of diversity

cumulated, e.g. Taranee from *W.I.T.C.H.* is not only a basketball player but also likes maths and classical music. Characterizations of this kind appear interchangeable and seem to have little proximity to everyday life.

making characters diverse, and what constitutes a “good” representation? These questions were the starting point for another media analysis, an IZI study from 2009, which will be presented in the following. Our aim was to determine whether local reality is represented in domestic programmes on German children’s TV. Compared to the situation in the US, cultural diversity in Germany seems very different: every 4<sup>th</sup> child is from a migrant background, i.e. either the child itself or its parents have immigrated. The 2 largest migrant groups come from Turkey and the former Soviet Union, neither of them belonging to the “classic” visible minorities present in the US.

To be able to include different aspects of diversity, we took the construct of the “natio-ethno-cultural other” from migration pedagogy. Characters can differ from each other on the basis of national, ethnic or cultural aspects (Mecheril, 2004). We coded TV characters in a randomly selected week according to these 3 aspects (cf. Tab. 1).



Ill. 3: Screenshots of *Gloria’s House*: diverse characters

A character has a national background when it becomes clear that s/he comes from a particular country or has a particular nationality. Ethnic markers are e.g. language, name and clothing.<sup>3</sup> External features such as an individual’s skin colour or physiognomy can also point to a specific ethnic background. Since national and ethnic markers partially overlap – language, for example, can indicate nationality – these 2 categories were coded jointly as “natio-ethnic markers”. Cultural markers are specific attitudes and ways of thinking which influence characters’ actions and point

to a cultural affiliation (e.g. religious affiliation or knowledge of certain customs and habits).<sup>4</sup> For each natio-ethno-culturally diverse (human) character, we completed a character report with all the information which could be deduced from watching the series attentively. Natio-ethno-cultural markers were coded in 3 dimensions (Völcker, 2005): external appearance (physiological dimension), inner life (psychological dimension) and social context, i.e. the characters' family and friends.

### *Diversity in a week of German TV*

In one sample week of children's TV with 154 hours of programming,<sup>5</sup> we found 34 characters with a diverse natio-ethno-cultural background. They appeared as main or minor characters, or were represented in groups of people. Of the 448 characters coded, only 7.6 % presented different natio-ethno-cultural characters. What is more, the absolute number of characters was quite small, because very little locally-produced programming was broadcast in this sample week (only 9 % of the fictional programmes, or less than 15 hours).

### *A whole spectrum of characters*

However, we found that a whole spectrum of natio-ethnic markers characterized the human protagonists in the one sample week of children's TV: the external appearance of a character, his/her language, the use of an ethnic name or clothing typical of a particular country. But diversity was also narrated by means of the characters' social environment, e.g. their family members.

Less often, characters were identified by cultural aspects. An example was the Chinese physician Dr. Fushi in the series *Sissi – Die Prinzessin* (Sissi – the Princess). By practising traditional Chinese medicine he displayed to some extent a cultural identity of his own. With this combination of cultural and natio-ethnic markers, the Chinese doctor represents one end of the

spectrum (cf. Ill. 4). At the other end of the spectrum is Katja, whose migration background could only be deduced from the natio-ethnically marked names of her aunt and uncle in an episode of the series *Die Pfefferkörner* (The Peppercorns).

This, too, is diversity: characters are created diverse to different extents and on different levels!

We decided for 2 reasons to follow up on the representation of diversity, using a further sample. Firstly, because of the small overall number of characters in the first sample, we specially wanted to choose programmes which presented diverse figures. Secondly, many shows are constructed as series, i.e. the viewer does not learn eve-



**Katja:**  
Family name (natio-ethnic marker)



**Dr. Fushi:**  
Clothing, language, appearance (natio-ethnic marker)  
Practises traditional Chinese medicine (cultural marker)

Ill. 4: Diverse characters with few/many natio-ethno-cultural markers: Katja and Dr. Fushi represent two ends of a spectrum.

rything about the character conception from a single episode broadcast. Other episodes of *Die Pfefferkörner* show that Katja also speaks Russian. This is a further natio-ethnic marker which characterizes her.

### **Diversity in characters, plot and setting**

We put together 10 series from German children's and family TV (1998-2009). The series had to include a multicultural ensemble of characters appearing repeatedly (whether in main or minor roles). We analyzed 86 hours of programming from this selection<sup>6</sup>

- for diversity in character, plot and setting and
- for best-practice examples, drawing on findings from migration pedagogy (Mecheril, 2004).

### *Diversity in characters*

We coded 112 characters, 39 child characters and 73 adult characters.

*Go beyond "superficial" diversity:* In this sample too, we found diversity in characters mainly in facial features and hair and skin colour, less in special ethnic clothing (only worn for special occasions, such as festivals, religious ceremonies etc.), or in ways of thinking, attitudes and behaviour. This has both advantages and disadvantages: The fact that characters look different but behave the same tends to underline the common ground between characters with diverse backgrounds. Characters in our sample generally do not differ from one another in their views or actions. We must ask critically whether this perhaps leaves out the diversity existing in society in real life. It is precisely this presentation of differences, combined with an emphasis on commonalities, which could offer the opportunity to present differences as "normal". An example from *Die Pfefferkörner* (season 2):

Cem is the only Muslim in the group of young detectives. For him, religion is important, and he attends an Islamic school in his free time, as we see in one episode. This distinguishes him from his friends. For them, however, this difference is not important, since the group is bound together by their interest in solving crimes. Nevertheless, we see Cem doing some things differently from others in his everyday life. Karol, a boy of Polish descent and of Catholic faith, is depicted in a similar way in season 5/6.

*Introduce hybrid characters:* Characters who are natio-ethno-culturally diverse are not simply "German" or "Turkish". Their particular situation in 2 cultures or systems of reference are presented by way of their name or their language skills.

Alongside names which clearly denote natio-ethnicity, and where first

name and surname both come from one cultural area – such as “Miguel Hernandez” and “Lena Eklund” –, there are also “hybrid” names: A boy’s name from a Chinese-German binational marriage is “Xiaomeng Weidtmann”. A grandfather of Turkish descent is called “Grandpa Nip-pes” after the part of the city (Cologne) he has lived in for decades.

Often characters are presented as bilingual speakers. All child characters in the sample who live in Germany speak German without an accent, thus establishing a norm. Mastery of the family language, shown by 17 children (44 %), however, is often not presented as a real skill. An example of how things can be done differently, from *KRIMI.DE Erfurt*:

In one episode Julia communicates with Romanian children in her native language, Romanian. The children are being forced to steal by adults. With her language abilities, Julia plays a crucial role in solving the crime.

**Avoid stereotypical characters:** A stereotype develops when a familiar pattern is reproduced again and again. Characters are repeatedly depicted with the same typical attributes. Simply turning these attributes into their opposites, however, does not stop the creation of stereotypes; as it merely produces counter-stereotypes.

We find a certain amount of stereotyping in Muslim parent figures: in 7 of the 9 families in the sample they are presented as single parents (i.e. 78 %. In reality, only 13 % of all parents from migrant backgrounds in Germany are raising children alone). This can well be an effort to counter the image of the traditional, conservative and intact Muslim family which is so often conjured up in social discourse. This uniform depiction, however, does not do justice to the diversity of everyday life, and reinforces new stereotypes (since the only traditional Muslim family occurring in the sample wants to force their daughter into an arranged marriage).

Avoiding a stereotype is much easier with a larger cast. If there is only one individual character s/he has to serve as a representative for a whole group. Including more characters from the same natio-ethno-cultural background opens space for greater differentiation and individual characterization, as some of the series show.

#### **Diversity in the plot**

The action which unfolds within an episode is organized by a plot or narrative. Natio-ethno-cultural diversity takes centre-stage in various ways in the encounters of characters. If “diverse” characters play only minor roles, however, diversity is only rarely a narrative theme.

#### **Tell differences in cultural attitudes:**

Some protagonists are characterized by attitudes connected to their natio-ethno-cultural background. These patterns of thought are often picked up in the plot, and unfold in a story.

In order to avoid stereotypes, the plot shows that there are different ways of thinking within a single natio-ethno-cultural group. This can counteract homogenizing and generalizing statements such as “All Italians, Turks, Chinese people etc. are/think ...”. This is often achieved by introducing a further character who argues for a different point of view. An example from *Die Pfefferkörner* (season 6):

The main theme is forced marriage in a middle-class Pakistani family. The parents are planning to marry 14-year-old Zarina to her cousin in Islamabad. Now a character is introduced who obviously comes from a Pakistani background. This man argues – with a discernible accent – against an early marriage: “You’re still so young! Finish school first, study, find a good job. Maybe in a few years.”

**Pick up specific, relevant themes:** Certain issues are of particular relevance for people with a diverse natio-ethno-cultural background. For example, children and teenagers often have to explain to others about belonging to different cultures, they get culturally

disparaged, or are referred to simply as “foreigners”. Many migrants or illegal immigrants face administrative hurdles. “Diverse” characters should be depicted in the plot as subjects who are capable of action, and who actively engage with the issues at stake. Creative responses, e.g. to other people’s assumptions, even provide good material for stories. An example from the series *Rennschwein Rudi Rüssel*:

Ayla, a girl of Turkish descent, is at her new primary school. She is interrogated by a classmate. Ayla, however, gives quite different answers to those which the “majority society” would typically expect, i.e. “Turkish” and “from Turkey”.

Girl: “What’s your name?”

Ayla: “Ayla!”

Girl: “Where does that name come from?”

Ayla: “From my parents.”

Girl: “Are you from somewhere else?”

Ayla: “I’m from Cologne [name of a German city].”

**And there’s so much more ...** Natio-ethno-cultural diversity should not only be an issue when there is a problem or conflict, however. Differences can be narrated in an informative and fun way. It is important that programmes look at the theme of diversity from the children’s own point of view. For children, natio-ethno-cultural differences may not be the central aspect at all. The boarding school soap *Das Haus Anubis* (House of Anubis) is an example of this kind of narrative focused on everyday teen life, where diversity is included in a very casual way. Here 2 of the 8 teen protagonists – and some of the adult minor characters – introduce natio-ethnic diversity without overemphasizing cultural differences. However, social reality is not played out solely in the upper and middle classes.

An aspect worth considering is that the plot can contribute to stereotyping even when the characters are not stereotypes!

In 2 series in the sample the ethnic minority of Sinti and Roma (“gypsies”) is depicted. In both episodes, the story

is about theft. Sinti and Romanies are suspects, not the real villains. But the stereotype of the “stealing gypsy” is perpetuated through characters who state this apparently well-known conviction. In the course of both episodes, the suspicion proves to be wrong. But even if it was not intentional, and even if it was meant to disprove the stereotype: by putting Sinti and Romanies in the context of a story about stealing and having other characters state that “everyone knows stealing is one of their traditions” you create an association between the group and the crime – while a single person who does not commit a crime associated with their group does not disprove a stereotype. Instead, you might help pass on a stereotype to another generation who would not have known about this stereotype beforehand.

### Diversity in the setting

Characters are often assigned particular locations for action, such as their own home or places where they spend their free time. Some of the “diverse” characters in the sample are associated with specific locations, some of which in turn feature natio-ethnic markers.

*Open up unfamiliar locations:* It is the privilege of television to allow the audience glimpses into locations to which most viewers would normally have no access. Fictional programmes can also create new insights into natio-ethnic diversity. In the sample, for example, we see a Russian-Orthodox church and the classroom of an Islamic school, as depicted in *Die Pfefferkörner*. To really promote understanding, however, we need realistic depictions of authentic locations.

*Create hybrid spaces:* “Hybrid” spaces contain different natio-ethnic-cultural markers. Integrating different markers into a set allow viewers to connect with familiar aspects, and at the same time get acquainted to the unfamiliar. The setting can symbolically express something new arising from elements of diverse backgrounds, e.g. in *KRIMI.DE Hamburg:*

The natio-ethnic-cultural background of the protagonist Coco becomes obvious from the way her room is decorated. A flag on the wall combines the Turkish half-moon with the colours of the German flag. This indicates that Coco does not see herself as either “just” Turkish or “just” German. The symbolically represented issue of belonging is not made the subject of the narrative. Coco’s 2 backgrounds are, however, literally present “in the background”, and harmoniously combined (cf. also the article *Under Pressure* in this issue).

### Conclusion: different and the same

Media analyses of international and German children’s TV show that there is still ample room for “diverse” characters and stories. Children experience diversity in their daily lives. They should find this local diversity reflected on television, in form of positive and exciting depictions which emphasize common ground. Television can also reveal the resourcefulness which springs from the experience of being different, and show ways children can deal with differences. Alongside the quantity of representations, their quality is, of course, also central.

Fictional characters should not be defined solely by their natio-ethnic-cultural background. As well as the “same” (themes which affect all children should be dealt with), the characters should also be allowed to be “different”. Their particular background must also be allowed to be visible – and not just in their external appearance, e.g. in a group composed of characters with different skin colours. ■

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> IBGE, 2006, <http://www.ibge.gov.br>

<sup>2</sup> Statistics South Africa, 2009. <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0302/P03022009.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> According to Frederik Barth (1969), ethnic groups distinguish themselves from one another by way of “ethnic boundary markers”: “Certain specific symbols identify who belongs to an ethnic group and who does not. Clothing, headdress or lan-

guage are used here as markers” (quoted by Bös, 2008). The allocation to a group is also based on these so-called membership signals: “Symbolic non-members are registered as such because they – recognizably – advertise a deviation” (Mecheril, 2004, p. 51f).

<sup>4</sup> Natio-ethnic and cultural markers differ in scope: natio-ethnic markers indicate a character’s “origin”, to a limited extent. They cannot, however, give any information about the character’s attitudes and ways of thinking. Only cultural markers can offer this kind of information.

<sup>5</sup> The sample week was recorded as part of the international study *Children’s TV Worldwide* (2007). Only locally-produced, fictional shows (including international co-productions) from channels with a market share of over 5 % were evaluated. This criterion rendered 35 episodes of 23 programmes for the analysis. All but 3 of the programmes were on public broadcasters.

<sup>6</sup> The sample consisted of *Die Pfefferkörner* (NDR), *KRIMI.DE Hamburg* (NDR), *KRIMI.DE Erfurt* (KI.KA), *Schloss Einstein* (MDR), *Endlich Samstag!* (BR), *Paulas Sommer* (WDR), *Das Haus Anubis* (NICK), *Rennschwein Rudi Rüssel* (WDR), *Unser Charly* (ZDF), *Unsere 10 Gebote* (KI.KA). 9 of the series were commissioned by German public broadcasters, private channels mainly show imports.

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