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# Black, white, or Turkish?

## Do children and young people want TV characters with the same ethno-national-cultural background?

**Children and young people of specific ethnicity look for characters who are similar to themselves, such as when, for example, this particular ethnicity is problematised by society. Such characters must engage positively with this issue.**

The picture painted by media analyses is relatively unequivocal: television programming in Europe, Africa, and North and South America is dominated by “white” protagonists, that is to say, by characters with fair skin and of northern European descent.<sup>1</sup> The “Children’s Television Worldwide” study, for example, found that approximately 72 % of all (human) main characters could be identified as “white” (Götz et al., 2008). In German television, characters with an unambiguous immigration background are the exception rather than the rule, and moreover are clearly stereotyped (Echtermeyer/Schulz, 2003; Müller, 2005; Schiffer, 2008). 2 aspects of this state of affairs in particular must be criticised at a fundamental level:

- First, it does not represent reality. For all its creative freedom, television should also maintain a relationship with present-day reality, and the latter presents a vastly more multicultural aspect than that depicted by television. The media provide “cultural landscapes of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race and nationality” (Hall,

1996, p. 275), but what kind of landscapes are these, if specific elements of them are ignored or only represented in highly stereotyped form?

- Second, it is of significance for the reception, world view, and identity of adolescents if they do not see themselves and their cultural background represented on screen. While we are quick to assent to the formula “they deserve to see themselves on screen”, the question still remains: do children and young people actually want this? Do they look for characters with the same “ethno-national-cultural background”?<sup>2</sup> The findings of Terhart and Roth (2008) would not, initially at least, seem to lend unconditional support to this view: the most popular characters are, in principle, the same as those favoured by children of German descent. Elias and Lemish (also in this issue) provide arguments to show that it is precisely recently immigrated children who have plentiful reasons to assimilate, and to demonstrate assimilated behaviour both in their choice of programmes and their character preferences. It is however also possible that we see here only a reflection of what is available on television, where characters with an ethnic background play only a marginalised role.

Do children and young people of various ethnic backgrounds actually prefer television characters with

the same or similar ethno-national-cultural characteristics?

I would like to summarise some of the findings and conclusions of 2 American studies as well as an international study conducted by the IZI.

### Do young viewers actually show a preference for characters of the same ethno-national-cultural background?

Kristin J. Anderson and Donna Cavallaro (2002) conducted a survey of 79 8- to 13-year-olds of diverse ethno-national-cultural backgrounds in California. The 4 largest groupings in the survey were “African-American”, “Asian-American”, “Latino”, and “white”. Questions about whom the children admired, who they would most like to be, or simply who they thought was “cool” revealed astonishing differences between the individual ethno-national-cultural groups (see Fig. 1).

First of all, only 39 % of Asian-Americans named people known to them personally; the larger proportion, by far, consisted of media characters. In the case of the African-American and “white” groups, the proportion of the latter was in excess of 64 %.

Secondly, the choice of media figures itself demonstrated sharply defined differences (see Fig. 1). 67 % of African-American and “white” children selected role models with their own ethno-national-cultural background. Several of the Asian-Americans and

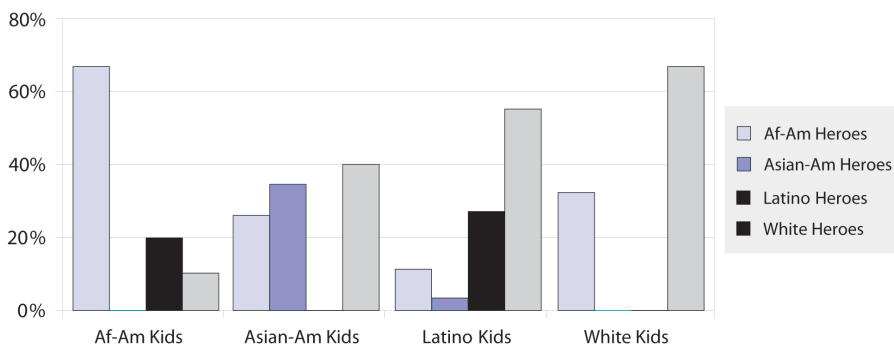


Fig. 1: Ethnicity of TV heroes/heroines named by American children as media role models (reprinted with kind permission from *Childhood Education* 78 (3/2002), p. 165)

Latinos (40–56 %) also chose white TV characters. Only 35 % of children of Asian descent named Asian characters, while only 28 % of the Latino-Americans chose Latinas/os. The authors of the survey certainly see this as indicating a continued major interest in white characters, but in light of the rather marginal selection of Asian (approx. 2.5 %) and Latino (6 %) characters (see SAG), the presence of these figures among the children's previously mentioned role models is enormous.

To this extent the conclusion is relatively unambiguous: children look for media characters of the same ethno-national-cultural background.

These results were confirmed by a further American study. Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) questioned 208 students about their favourite TV characters. 98 % of the “white” Americans chose white characters, while over 54 % of the African-American students chose black characters. In the authors' opinion this confirms their view that “perceived similarity” plays an important role in the choice of favourite television characters.

### Why children look for TV characters with the same ethno-national-cultural background (or why not)

The reasons why TV characters of the same ethno-national-cultural background become favourites (or why

they do not) certainly vary widely, and at the present time can only be provisionally explained. On the one hand it is a question of the programmes on offer, which only provide a very limited selection of suitable characters and narratives. But there are also highly personal reasons why a character with a particular ethno-national-cultural background is preferred.

In a series of ethnographically oriented case studies conducted in New York, Munich, Bangalore, and Johannesburg, the IZI, in collaboration with other international partners, explored the question of how the media were utilised by 14- to 15-year-olds in the construction of identity and as a mechanism for coping with everyday life.<sup>3</sup> As expected, the life circumstances of the survey participants differ in the individual case studies. The local or cultural contexts depend in part on very specific conditions in respect of gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic situation. Nevertheless, here too the findings reveal the same basic tendency: that is, that young people prefer TV characters who are similar to themselves, also in terms of their ethno-national-cultural background.

On the one hand this applies to the young people who belong to the dominant ethnicity or social group. Among the South African interviewees, for example, the white youth Jason, growing up in prosperous circumstances (“I am privileged in many ways; I don't worry about many

things”) is interested in actors such as Johnny Depp or the young (white) Superman of *Smallville*. Dennis, a white boy from New York, exhibits a marked preference for the (white) character Ryan in *O.C. California*, since – like him – he has to deal with the control of violence. Martina and Verena from southern Germany nominated Lolle (*Berlin, Berlin*) as their favourite character, since her experiences were very similar to their own.

However, the preference for TV characters with the same ethno-cultural background is also found amongst those interviewees who do not belong to the dominant group, and specifically look for reflections of this situation on television. 2 examples will illustrate this.

### Bongani: Doing good in difficult circumstances

Bongani's life in the township of Soweto, Johannesburg is dominated by poverty and violence. “We are poor, we are 10 people living in one shack, and my mother is the only one working.” His everyday life in the harsh environment of Soweto is characterised by worries about survival and the effort to acquire a positive outlook towards the future. At the same time he is developing a strong sense of community. Together with his friends he has founded a group called “Survivors”, who have fun together and attempt to do good in their neighbourhood by helping others – for example by planting and watering vegetable patches, removing waste, or refurbishing the corrugated iron huts. Among other TV personalities he admires the black presenter Siphon on *Yo TV*, because he is respectful, self-assured, and adroit in his handling of others (“He is not shy and he can talk to anybody.”). The presenter Siphon embodies Bongani's ideals for a better future in Johannesburg. In all this, it goes without saying for Bongani that Siphon is black, and has emerged

from circumstances similar to his own (cf. Bulbulia, 2006).

***Tia: Presenting oneself with confidence as a young black woman***

Tia, an Afro-American girl from New York, tells of her favourite character, the single mother Nikki in the Afro-American sitcom *The Parkers*. Tia prizes the actress Mo'Nique in general, because despite her generous proportions (“a big girl”) she proceeds in confident, no-nonsense fashion towards her goals: “[Nikki] makes it seem like you could do whatever, and she’s a woman, too.” Tia herself is quite slim, and in the photographs showing her living conditions presents herself as a confident young woman who is proud of her body (see Ill. 1). For her, the media character is symbolic material, providing her with the insight that even with a body that is neither white, nor particularly slim, she can make her way in life with self-confidence (cf. Fisher-Keller/Freud, 2006).

Here the fact that the protagonist is of Afro-American descent, and presents herself with pride, is a fundamental precondition, since it is precisely this shared situation – that of being a black woman – with which Tia is coming to terms at the moment.



Ill. 1: The 15-year-old Tia at home

**Favourite characters with a different ethno-cultural background**

The case studies, however, not only allow us to develop ideas about why a character with the same ethno-cultural background might be attractive, but also why young people choose characters with different backgrounds as well.

***Shawanna: That’s how a mother should be***

Shawanna from New York, who describes herself as black and is being brought up by her grandmother, has a favourite TV character, but in this case her skin colour is not her own: the youthful-looking mother Lorelai in the series *Gilmore Girls*. According to Shawanna, she is a “friend-mother” – quite unlike her own mother, who abandoned her while she was still a small child.

The theme of being “abandoned” and “left in the lurch” by her own mother occupies a central position for Shawanna. Lorelai Gilmore and the relationship with her daughter Rory provide the symbolic material by which the lack of attention by her own mother is dealt with in a parasocial context. The personal theme of “being abandoned” by her mother, and the development of an idealised image of motherhood, here take precedence over the negotiation of identity, of being black.

Nevertheless, the question remains whether a series with a similar mother-daughter theme, but with Afro-American actors and a corresponding social context, would not have been even more attractive (cf. Fisher-Keller/Freud, 2006).

***Nazan: Being recognised as a woman***

Nazan is a second-generation immigrant living in Bavaria, Germany. She attends secondary school, but for her this tends to be a peripheral matter, since more importance attaches to

group friendships, and recognition by boys without being regarded as a “slut” in the process. Nazan describes Turkey as her homeland, to which she wishes to return after finishing school. However, she has no concrete idea of the country itself or everyday life there. For Nazan, being Turkish means being a member of a group. This includes her family, which she describes as a liberal, non-religious Turkish family. Above all, however, it is her social peer group and the Turkish community at the youth centre. There contacts can be established with ease: “And they talk to me, [and then] they say, ‘So, where do you come from?’ Then I tell them: ‘I’m a Turk’. That’s also an advantage for me. Then they say: ‘Wow, cool! You’re ... you come from our country. You’re cool.’” Within her own community Nazan experiences her ethnic identity as something positive, which makes her a sought-after companion, and gives her a sense of belonging. Nazan is a very keen television viewer and has several favourite series, including *King of Queens*, *The Simpsons* or the Turkish series *Europa Jakasin*. But her absolute favourite is *Friends*, even though the series is no longer running at the moment. She raves about Phoebe, because she is “a bit crazy, but that’s really funny” and “[she’s] also so clever: an intelligent, witty woman, and that’s why I like her so much”. For Nazan, Phoebe is the paradigm of the perfect woman; she is “really perfect ... you couldn’t change anything about her”. Phoebe’s qualities and talents would also enable one to survive well in Nazan’s world: perfect appearance, which guarantees recognition as a woman; humour and wit, plus a dash of madness, by means of which she can hold her friends and others at bay, and therefore get her own way.

For Nazan, being Turkish is not a problem, but rather something which offers attractiveness and a sense of belonging. Problems – such as the attainment of her dream career as a

flight attendant after her successful apprenticeship as a retail saleswoman – or possible future conflicts, if she returns to Turkey, are not relevant for her, and she does not dwell on them. For her, it is all about the here and now of her peer group. For these purposes, a quintessential American beauty – who, however, does her own thing within her social circle, and who sometimes transgresses boundaries – provides richer material. Certainly other actresses, or characters, could assume this role for her – but a problematic character who, for example, confronted the difficult situation of immigrants in Germany would be of less interest for Nazan at the moment.

### Summary: identity and ethnicity of characters

The results suggest that young people select their favourite characters entirely in accordance with their own ethnicity, assuming that the opportunity to do so is available to them. The pattern revealed by these case studies is common to a whole series of cases: membership of a lower hierarchical group and experiences of denigration and marginalisation are accompanied by the search for a corresponding symbolisation which recognises these situations and shows how to deal with them positively. Or, to put it more simply: if young people feel devalued as a result of their ethno-national-cultural identity, or find themselves in difficult situations which are closely connected to their ethnicity or immigrant status, they look for television characters and narratives which reflect this theme and engage with it positively.

If they do not experience their own status primarily in terms of denigration, it is apparently easier for them to utilise quite different symbolic materials. If topics other than the significance of their own ethno-national-cultural identity occupy the foreground of their thoughts, they

seek material which allows them to deal specifically with these topics. At the moment it is not possible to ascertain to what extent characters with the same ethno-national-cultural backgrounds would be more attractive in these cases than, say, a white American, since such characters are still in short supply.

Unfortunately, there are only a few programmes which tackle this theme in a fundamentally positive manner and as a self-evident necessity, and make use of characters who do not share the dominant ethno-cultural background. For the most part, at least in this corner of the world, the approach to this subject is dominated by a tendency towards problematisation. In this way, moreover, quite important opportunities arising out of this theme are missed, since ethnic identities other than the dominant ones can provide a whole range of projection surfaces, onto which may be projected everything from very common experiences of denigration and stereotyping to courage and self-assertion, the pleasure taken in “being different”, etc. Hence it is not simply a matter of providing symbolic material for people with an ethno-national-cultural background differing from the dominant one, but also of recognising the chances afforded by characters and narratives whose casts do not consist solely of well-known faces from the dominant ethnic group. ■

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In the Asiatic world the proportion of principal characters with Asiatic characteristics is noticeably higher, but here too, North American programmes continue to dominate in many countries.
- <sup>2</sup> The term derives from Mecheril (2004); cf. also Terhart and Roth (2008).
- <sup>3</sup> Under the scientific supervision of Dr. Maya Götz. Project leaders in the individual countries were: M. Götz and P. Strohmaier (Munich), J. Fisherkeller (New York), D. McMillin (Bangalore), and F. Bulbulia (Johannesburg).

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