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South African girls' imagined TV heroines

Princesses and assorted heroines in the Southern Africa Karoo

A study inquired the impact of media roles onto girl children's construction of heroines and investigated further influencing aspects.

It is remarkable how this thing called "the media" comes under fire every time there is a tragic or socially unconventional occurrence that involves young people. The view that children are very impressionable and vulnerable to media representations finds a further echo in the countries we describe as "the south" in terms of what has been termed the "cultural imperialism thesis" (Tomlinson, 1993). It proposes that the powerful media of the north validate Western ways of being and, in a sense, colonise the minds of those living in the south, places like South Africa which is the space I inhabit. This view of the relationship between young people and the media contrasts with the more celebratory one that views the young person as a sassed and canny reader of media texts who exercises agency. For example, tweens' performances and stylising of their looks as feminine or sexy has been described as "safe play, controlled adventure, imagination and enchantment" (Boden, 2006).

What needs to be held, I suggest, are strands of both and we ought to recognise the power of the media discourses and that of individual agency. To this end, I recount how a small

group of South African girls mediated the media they encounter. A limited study was undertaken in the Eastern Cape town of Grahamstown with girls who encounter the products of American TV (aka global media)¹ as well as adult and local media, which they mediate in relation to their lived experiences.

The study

The study probed how certain girl children negotiate the media, taking the form of 2 racially mixed focus groups of 6 girls each at a local girls' junior school. While the socio-economic backgrounds of the girls varied – some parents were university lecturers, some domestic workers – they all had TV access. In no way is this study generalisable, but rather provides a single interesting snapshot of how these girls mediate their lived (socio-cultural) worlds and the mediated worlds of TV.

The focus groups were designed so that the girls would produce a drawing of an imaginary TV programme heroine in order to make obvious how they draw on different repertoires of ideas at their disposal. The warm-up discussion included a chat about their favourite TV characters. Interestingly, they preferred active girl protagonists who act outside the domestic sphere of the home and also actively perform in public spaces – from crime fighter Kim Possible to singing and danc-

ing *High School Musical* characters. Our discussion moved to TV productions with princesses. They all loved them and spoke of a range of different ones with Disney princesses featuring high on their lists. Unlike their favourite characters the "specialness" of the princesses was linked to their birth, looks, clothes, and fussiness. They were described as clean, scared of spiders, wearing real (not fake) jewellery, ball gowns and crowns, and having long blond hair. Some associated them with castles (a European idyll). Any attempt to introduce princesses who were not white was side-stepped and it was evident that these imagined princesses were white, not black.

These imagined princesses were white, not black

To probe race more we discussed the dolls they had. They were shown a range of images of different Barbie dolls (they all had a Barbie) from a blond Malibu Barbie to dark-skinned, Japanese, Highland, Spanish, etc. and asked to indicate their 2 preferences. All but one chose Malibu blond beach Barbie as a favourite. A single black girl chose a brown-skinned, brown-haired Barbie, and 2 (one white, one black) liked the red-haired Irish Barbie. For the rest, 21 out of 24, it was a blond Barbie in gowns or sexy attire. None of these girls living in an African town owned a black Barbie



South African girls' imagined heroines: Crime fighter Crystal (ill. 1), fighter Caria (ill. 2), actor and model Briget (ill. 3), and Christine, who loves shopping (ill. 4)

or a black doll and only a few knew someone who had one.

We then got to the crux of the exercise, the task of constructing their own TV character for a new TV series. Prompted to think about their heroine carefully and her role in the story, they set about drawing them and described their creations thereafter. The results, I suggest, are interesting in terms of the predictability of many heroines but also in terms of how they integrate their own worlds into them.

Let me start with the 4 princesses. While this might be considered predictable, their depictions were not simply straightforward. While all wore crowns, 2 had blond hair, 2 brown. Their roles too went beyond being rescued by a prince – although one was – but they were singing and dancing royalty! While Princess Cassie lived in a European castle, drawn in the background, and the stuff of European fairy tales, others lived in the worlds of their creators. Princess Cassie lives in Grahamstown with her mum and dad, and Princess Isabella plays with her friends. Then 2 characters were reminiscent of *Kim Possible* scenarios mixed with elements of their own worlds. No dresses for crime fighter Crystal (see ill. 1), whose special gloves enable her to climb sheer walls, but, who interestingly also babysits Ninja children and wears a locket with her

sisters' photos in it (as does the creator). Caria (see ill. 2) might wear a dress, but she is a fighter who also loves to dance and "likes her gran best", who is also a fighter.

3 heroines were performers. Pop star Kate lives with her mother and grandparents. Singer and actor Lucy is no Anglo-Saxon blond, but is black as signified by her hair extensions. Blond "Beyoncé" dances and plays music, but lives at home with her parents and siblings. And then there is "Briget" (see ill. 3), wearing trousers and T-shirt, and whose hair extensions are intended to signify her blackness. She is an actor and model who gets what she wants. She has attitude and is clearly based on a South African adult soapie. Finally Christine (see ill. 4) worked in the "Spar" (supermarket), loves going to the mall and weddings, and her friends are Kate and Amy.

Complex weaving of the girls' own worlds with media roles

In this brief snapshot, what is apparent is a set of heroines constructed in line with the repertoire of media roles they admire – princesses, pink clothing, largely white, but not exclusively. This is clearly only part of the story for they introduce their own lived worlds and pleasures. The delight in performance is a repeated element

and their family lives intrude fairly obviously, as does the media (such as the soapie). These young girls presented a complex weaving of their own worlds with the media roles they encounter. Wouldn't it be just great if the media producers would provide them with even more diversity to engage with? ■

NOTES

¹ *A gendered content analysis of children's TV programming on South African free to air TV that provided the depressing results of the limited representations and roles for girl children and black children (cf. Goetz et al., 2008; Boshoff/Prinsloo, 2008)*

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