The Detrimental Effects of Poor Minority Representation in Children's Media

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Think back to your childhood, and the role television played in it. Sitting on the living room floor watching cartoons, going to see a new movie with your family or a friend, talking about the newly-released episode of a sitcom at school Monday morning. On the surface, you were likely watching these movies and shows for entertainment, but you probably also looked up to the heroes and main characters as role models; most children do. Children also take television shows as an accurate representation of the world in reality. This becomes problematic when the main characters of their favorite shows are all straight and white—it teaches them that protagonists and change-makers can only be one kind of person, and that if they aren't that kind of person, they are either invalid or fated to be a side character. Minority children's, and then minority adolescents', mental health and self-esteem tends to wane because of this lack of representation. Specifically, colored people and people of the LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) community struggle to find people to identify with on television, as many of the characters who are meant to provide representation for these groups are based on stereotypes, which tells children they only have one option for who they can be. Limited representation or lack of representation of different types in children's media can affect their development of self-esteem and self-image, often negatively, in different ways.

Television can teach children how they should live and act, which can invoke confusion, anxiety or depression when the children's personalities do not line up with how they are being told to act. As child psychologist Ebony Roberts has found in her research, television gives children ideas about the world around them, and because they are in such an early stage of development, children "take seriously what they see on television and uncritically incorporate it into their conception of how things are in the world" (Roberts). And so the stereotypes presented to them through television are incredibly damaging, as they cannot view it critically or take it with a grain of salt. For example, being queer is often considered an "alternative lifestyle", especially in television. Most TV shows seem to present sets of specific behaviors and values for queer people to adopt (the flamboyant gay man, the headstrong lesbian, etc.). But as Researcher Jay Poole points out, those given roles come with many limitations, and "for those whose lives don't conform to such constraints, anxiety and depression often manifest, often creating significant clinical concerns (Poole). This is true among adults, so for children, who, as Roberts reports, are taking television as a perfect representation of what the world looks like, the results are exaggeratedly detrimental to their self-esteem. In many cases, it leads to internalized racism, homophobia, or transphobia, creating internal identity conflict. When I first started questioning my sexuality in my early teenage years, I felt an

inexplicable repulsion at the idea of identifying as a "lesbian"—a word with which I had come to associate hardheadedness, masculinity, and even predatoriness. So it took me a while to come to terms with the fact that I was in fact a lesbian, an aspect of my identity that does not define my personality, as it seems to do with lesbians on television, but rather adds to it. Similarly, I've had friends of color who have expressed a sort of shame in their identity—black friends who as children felt they should not be black because they didn't feel like they "fit" the roll (aka stereotypes). But the fact of the matter is that people of color and/or the LGBT community are people before anything else, and our personalities exist outside of the communities we are a part of. And television needs to be representative of that.

Another harmful effect of a lack of good queer and colored representation in the media is the message to straight, cisgender (meaning, not transgender), and white children. It's a two-way street: minority children learn that they are unimportant, and majority children learn to treat them as such. In his research, Researcher William Hall discovered that "compared to their heterosexual peers, LGBQ [lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer] youth are three times as likely to have thought about suicide" (Hall). He goes on to explain the minority stress theory that leads to this in LGBTQ+ youth as well as other minorities: minorities have the stressors of everyday life that everyone else has, along with the added stress of internalized negative social attitudes (homophobia, racism), prejudice events, and even expectations of prejudice events. The internalization of negative social attitudes ties back into what Roberts and Poole were arguing: that television teaches minorities that they can only be side characters or stereotypes. Prejudiced events, however, come from other people believing those stereotypes. Researchers Riva Tukachinsky, Dana Mastro, and Moran Yarchi looked into the correlation between television depictions of racial minorities through the years and the corresponding attitudes toward them; the correlation is dramatic. For example, "overall television viewing has been found to be associated with greater endorsement of negative stereotypes of Latinos" (Tukachinsky). Such negative stereotyping leads to prejudice events and hate crimes and ultimately brings down the self-image and mental health of minorities even further.

But all of this is useless information, dear reader, if we do not accept that there is a critical lack of good representation in kid's shows. Recently there has been a tremendous increase in representation for children, and it would be senseless to ignore our progress. Until the release of Aladdin in 1992, all of the Disney princesses were white; now five of the official princesses are non-white (Mitchell-Smith 209). This could be read in a couple of ways. The first way, and perhaps most optimistic, would be to point out how far we've come, that we've gone from all white princesses to five non-white princesses in under twenty years. And yes! It is important to acknowledge how much diversity has been added to the children's film industry in recent years. But it's also important to understand that this just started twenty years ago—we are still in the beginning of this big change, and there is still so much room for growth. White princesses, and characters in general, still outnumber the non-white characters—and it is strange to lump together non-white characters as though all that matters is that they are not white. If we broke it down, we would find only one black princess, only one Asian princess, only one Middle Eastern princess, etcetera—it is not good enough to make one movie to represent an ethnicity

and then move on, as though you've completed an item on your checklist. What children need is a plethora of people like them, since, as mentioned before by Researcher Poole, offering children only one example of how they could be based on their skin harms their sense of identity. To be unaware of the critical lack of representation is to support the very construct we are trying to dismantle: white supremacy. To not see the problem is to feed into the idea that white characters dominating the film industry is the natural way of things, as white is the "default".

Even newer is the idea that straight might not be the default, as mainstream films with leading LGBTQ+ characters were not common until around 2010, when the discussion of legalizing gay marriage in the United States picked up—and have yet to be entirely normalized. The Disney princess discussion becomes laughable in this context; although a couple of them have defied the archetype of needing or wanting a prince, none have any interest in princesses—and becoming a prince is out of the question. The closest Disney has come to queer representation was its live-action remake of Beauty and the Beast, in which Gaston's supporting man LeFou was in love with him. While this started some conversation, Disney has done nothing to this extent since in terms of queerness— and Le Fou's love story was secondary, merely hinted at at a few points throughout the film. This can hardly be the end of the story.

In sum, children learn about the world around them, and their place in that world, from television shows, which can be extremely harmful when television fails to teach them that they can be anyone or anything they want to be. Minorities such as members of the LGBTQ+ community and people of color are taught as children that they can only be side characters and stereotypes, never themselves, never the protagonist. This is harmful to their self-image, as well as other children's (and later adults') image of them. Hopefully, writers and directors within the film and television industry will work harder to write more of a variety for colored and queer characters—important characters whose sexuality, gender identity, race, or ethnicity does not define who they are, but is still respected and celebrated.

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