

# Media representations of race and ethnicity research papers example

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Cartoons seem innocent in their attempt to make children laugh. In many cases they also seek to teach a lesson. The lesson can be something as simple as the importance of sharing or being honest. It can also teach something serious like looking both ways before crossing the street. The less obvious lessons are more subtle and often more lasting in the psyche of the juvenile audience. It happens more often when the cartoons characters are human beings instead of animals or puppets. Human cartoon characters cause children of all ages to absorb significant details about race, gender and culture. As an example, Dora the Explorer and her cousin Diego have their own shows where navigating the terrain of wild life, sharing and learning about animals are the central theme. While they welcome audiences of all cultural backgrounds to participate, they speak Spanish and English. They encourage the viewer to repeat things in Spanish, and there is even a Rescue Pack that opens to a sultry salsa rhythm. It sends a positive message to Hispanic children no matter which country they represent. From being around young children, it seems that these cartoons also causes Black and White children to see Latino children as being fun, interesting and (other than speaking Spanish) no different than themselves. Ultimately, Latino children learn that that they can become biological research scientists or explorers and great problem solvers. From the way Dora deals with the sneaky fox, children learn tolerance and positive ways to handle someone who is trying to take what doesn't belong to them.

For this essay, two cartoons have been analyzes that represent totally different worlds. The Bratz and Fat Albert are as opposing as day and night. One of them represents a modern era of technology where cell phones and

internet are common. The other represents the 1970's. The 1970's was a time when children were exposed to less provocative music and less violence on television in general. Both were analyzed in terms of their support of racial and gender stereotypes and how they socialize children about race. This review was done with the pre-encounter stage of children in mind. This is the stage where a child absorbs many of the beliefs and values dominant in White culture.

Close analysis of Bratz and Fat Albert revealed some ambiguity in how they support racial stereotypes. In other words, it is obvious that there is a valiant effort to refrain from emphasizing stereotypes but they end up doing this exactly. For instance, the Bratz has one Black girl in the cartoon, and she may be the only Black character in the entire show. She doesn't behave any differently than the other girls who are White. The other girls wear bright lipstick and eye shadow. They keep their hair long and straight. The Black is the same which means she has no real identity of her own that sets her apart. Ironically, this is not truly how Black girls are viewed in society. The White girls are resourceful, frazzled over the simplest problems and prioritize looking fabulous at all times. The Black girl must act the same way if she is going to keep up with these girls. A young Black girl will watch this cartoon and feel that she needs to be dressed up all the time, have her hair bone-straight and needs a make-up kit in order to look fabulous. Essentially, she needs to act like a White girl and take on those values. Fat Albert blatantly supports racial stereotypes when it comes to how the Black children speak and in terms of the environment presented in the show. One character says, "ain't" at least ten times in the episode. They also live in a poor area where

they play in a junk yard. Portraying Black children in low income areas is consistent with the way Black characters have been portrayed in another television show called “ Good Times.” The only reason it was well received is because it was hosted by Bill Cosby who is a well-loved Black comedian. If Fat Albert was conceived in the mind of a White artist, Black people would have been totally insulted.

The stereotypes were not all negative. The White girls in Bratz offer a positive image of young people who can solve problems on their own by working together. The Fat Albert gang hangs out in the street all day, but they do not get into major trouble. Both cartoons defy negative stereotypes that the world might have about Black girls and boys. At the same time, they make fun of the known stereotypes like boys speaking slang while giving high-fives in agreement with a joke and girls getting frazzled over matching outfits and high heels.

Fat Albert and The Bratz both guide children towards associating themselves with one race, or another. First they do this by helping them to identify (or not identify) with the characters. A little Black girl who watches the Bratz might feel as though she is just as pretty as a white girl, as long as her hair can be long and straight. It is definitely not good because she needs to embrace her own hair no matter what the texture is. It is quite difficult to do when there are Dove Shampoo commercials and perm product commercials bombarding the living room each day. Also, the Bratz helps a White girl to feel great about her appearance and hopefully feel that Black girls are pretty too. The other concern is that the Bratz have a body shape that might make overweight girls self-conscious about themselves. Fat Albert is a show that

features children who have physical and personality differences among themselves despite being from the same culture. A Black child watching this show knows that they are indeed Black and should be proud whether they are super skinny, obese or if they speak a little different from others. The down side is that these children play in a junk yard. A Black child needs something more to aspire to than this. The reason is that in the 1960's and 1970's (and many years prior to this) Black children were not expected to rise above a low standard in all areas of life. Children watching this show may see themselves as poor and living in slummy areas only to find humor in it. Depending on the conversation with adult parents, they can come away feeling shame or inspired to do better.

In conclusion, the Bratz features girl power and no real identity for Black girls. Fat Albert features friendship and the coolness of slow drag walking, slang language and inventing new toys out of old junk. The characters speak to the creativity and musicianship of being Black. The lessons children learn from cartoons are taken into the classroom and other social situations and are played out in their interactions with one another. As they get older, children develop their own social systems whereby they impose standards of acceptable behavior for Blacks and Whites on each other. Unknowingly, the subliminal messages in cartoons set their guideline. Depending on their social experiences, children bring their own pre-conceived ideas to the television shows they watch. One of the best advising messages in Beverly Tatum's article is that adults should be involved in the child's life to offer supreme guidance. The Black girl in the Bratz is not locked into acting more urban, ghetto or exhibiting typical Black stereotypes. All Black children sit

together at lunch for the same reason they can all relate to Fat Albert and the gang. The one or two Black children that find more comfort in sitting among their White peers at lunch might easily relate to the Bratz cartoon.

### **Field Notes: The Bratz 500, Fat Albert**

How many characters of different races and ethnicities were portrayed? How do you know? How is race/ethnicity marked symbols?

Answer: There are two different races portrayed in this cartoon. One of the five girls is Black, and the others are White. Some have blond hair, and others have dark brown or reddish hair. Race and ethnicity are not boldly emphasized. However, the personalities, usage of language and enthusiasm are all identical. The Black character does not express herself differently or use a different kind of body language than the others. She is just like the others in every way except her complexion. Her hair is shiny, black and bone-straight just like the other girls.

Answer: All of the cartoon characters are Black in this cartoon. Race and ethnicity are strong symbols in this cartoon. The kids live in a somewhat poor-looking or urban area. They play and meet for fun in the city dump where they creatively make music on broken pianos and other make-shift instruments.

### **How important were the different characters to the plot/storyline?**

They all have the same role as a team of problem solvers.

The different characters each contributed something to the plot. Fat Albert was always the voice of moral reasoning ("Pot of Gold"). The others were the

funny, joking and pranking kids. They used metaphor, comical sarcasm and stories to create humor and validate the points made by Fat Albert.

Are there overall differences in the attitudes or behaviors of the characters of different race and ethnicities? Do they engage in different or similar types of activities?

There are no differences, surprisingly. They all behave the same. No matter what the problem or circumstances are in the story, they do not behave differently. They are all talented in the fashion industry and in working together to solve a problem. They all have small waste-lines, curvaceous hips, large lips, eyes and what little girls would begin to identify as a nice body which they should aspire to develop.

There was not much difference in the attitudes or behaviors in this cartoon. They all engaged in the same kinds of activities. Except that one child has a lisp or speech impediment due to have large lips. None of the other characters tease him because of it, but clearly this is a tactic to make the audience laugh.

## **How were the characters portrayed positively or negatively? Are racial minorities**

presented in a way that serves to reinforce or combat traditional stereotypes?

The one Black character in the cartoon combat's traditional stereotypes that are negative about Black girls. However, it also shows a Black girl behaving just like her white counterparts in the cartoon which is not great either. A Black girl may watch the cartoon and go to school acting the same way and set herself up for ridicule from her Black peers (depending on how deeply "

urban" the school is). It may also cause a Black girl to feel that her hair should be as long, flowing and straight as the hair of the characters.

Unfortunately, it has proven to be a problem among young Black girls. They have been seen insulting one another for not having straight hair.

This cartoon supports Black stereotypes in terms of the usage of poor English or slang. Use of the word "ain't" is prevalent. On the other hand, they did combat the racial stereotype of Black children getting together to cause trouble. Whenever Black children gather in one area, they might be thought of as trouble makers. However, in this cartoon the kids along with Fat Albert do not look for trouble. There are a few episodes where the female teacher has an afro hairdo and speaks intelligently. A sophisticated Black woman with natural (not permed) hair is great for girls to see. Overall, this cartoon likely has a huge influence on how boys see themselves.

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