



# Cultural Related Issues of Superheroes among Southern California University Students

Michelle Alfaro, Chelsea Corgan, Ana Dominguez, Amanda Gurtis, Kourtney Hicks, Monique Sheppard, and Catalina Zech  
University of La Verne



## INTRODUCTION

### Identifying Heroes

Few studies have examined if participants believe that superheroes should be portrayed as individuals of different ethnicities, and which ethnicity seemed most often portrayed. A study by White and O'Brien (1999) examined students from kindergarten to high school seniors and their conceptions of super heroes. The researchers asked them to provide an example of who they considered a hero and why. The results were then compared among age levels. As children grow and mature, their way of thinking also changes (White & O'Brien, 1999). The participants were examined for their knowledge of what a hero is, how they would describe one, and who they would consider to be a hero. The participants in kindergarten and second grade were interviewed whereas the third graders to twelfth graders were given a survey and some were also interviewed. The older students were surveyed and their responses demonstrated that their perceptions of superheroes developed from cartoon heroes who had super powers to sports heroes and family and friends. The individual participants considered to be a hero was placed in one of the following three categories: superhero, personal relationship, and public helpers such as police officers. As individuals age, they tend to pick heroes that are real life role models or pick someone who is close to themselves in terms of gender and ethnicity. If this is the case, we posit that it would be crucial to have positive heroes from diverse backgrounds in order for all children to relate to and to one day use as role models.

### Diversity in Therapy

In a publication in 1993, the office of Ethnic Minority Affairs at the American Psychological Association urged for the creation of new paradigms with regards to working with culturally different populations. Marlene D. De Rios PH.D., a medical anthropologist and a psychotherapist, developed a culturally congruent play therapy intervention to treat traumatized children, which is particularly useful when working with ethnic minorities and the Hispanic population. Dr. De Rios argues for an anthropological approach in play therapy to create hyper-aroused states for the children and to use superheroes which are referred to as "magical realism." A case study was conducted on 2 siblings, who were referred to Dr. De Rios after being run over by a small pickup truck. After the incident they had both developed a fear of crossing the street. The intervention consisted of play therapy in order to reenact the trauma. A doll which looked like a monster was placed in a truck bed and ethnic dolls were used to represent the children and the mother. The children were instructed to reenact the accident first and then the therapist reenacted it. In the second reenactment a super hero/religious figure (Jesus) was introduced to knock the monster out of the car and protect the children. The study indicates that the concept of using a superhero to magically vanish the evil perpetrator can be a very powerful tool when dealing with trauma.

### Hypothesis

It was hypothesized that participants would agree that the majority of superheroes are portrayed as being Caucasian and would agree that certain minority groups are underrepresented in the media.

## METHOD

### Participants

There were a total of 248 participants (82 males, 165 females). The sample was composed of Southern California college students. Participants were chosen via convenience sampling. The only exclusion criteria used in sampling was that participants had to be at least eighteen years old. The ethnic background of the participants was Latinos (43%), Caucasians (26%), African American (11%), Biracial (9%), Asian (7%), and Other (4%).

### Measures

The 7 page survey consisted of 12 demographic questions, 5 questions to establish previous superhero exposure/knowledge, 4 questions on individual perceptions about superheroes, 15 questions on identifying superheroes in the media, and 12 questions on creating a superhero to assess if participants self-identified. All items were designed by the researchers.

### Procedure

Participants were asked to read and sign consent forms and complete a 48-item survey that was created by the researchers that evaluated three aspects: individual perceptions about superheroes, identifying superheroes in the media, and creating a superhero. The researchers examined whether participants believed that certain ethnicities dominated the portrayal of superheroes in the media, which ethnicity dominated, and which groups do they feel were underrepresented. Participants were also asked if they believe there should be a diversity of ethnicities portrayed in the media. Qualitative comments were grouped into three categories: positive, negative, and not applicable. The study was conducted in numerous classrooms throughout the University of La Verne and in public locations at other colleges and universities.

## RESULTS

One way chi square analyses were run to evaluate if participants felt certain ethnic groups are underrepresented in the media. All were significant at  $p < .000$ . Refer to table 1 for percentages and chi square values.

Ninety two percent of the participants agreed that there should be more diversity in the portrayal of different ethnicities in the media. Regardless of participants answered yes or no if there should be more diversity, they were then asked as why or why not and their answers were grouped into three categories: positive, negative, and not applicable. The research team grouped responses as positive if reasons given supported diversity. An example of a positive response was "Children of all ethnicities should have someone to look up to." An example of a negative response was "White people are easier to draw, and [there is] no need to demonstrate diversity". Eighty percent of those who gave responses responded in a positive manner, and 15% responded with negative remarks.

Table 1. Percentages and Chi Square Values of Under-represented Ethnic Groups

Participants Are these groups underrepresented?			
Groups	Yes %	$\chi^2$	N
African American	80	70.08	192
Armenian	81	75.00	192
Asian	85	93.52	192
Biracial	62	11.02	192
Caucasian	2	1.76	192
Latino/Hispanic	89	114.10	192
Native American	85	96.33	192
Persian	81	74.14	191

\*all were significant at the  $p = .000$

## DISCUSSION

Participants were asked whether the media portrayed superheroes as different ethnicities. Most participants agree that there is a need for diversity to be portrayed in the media, and the data presented in Table 1 reflects this. Clearly, many believe that the dominant ethnicity that is showcased is Caucasian. However, it is relevant to note that participants feel there should be a need and a want for cultural diversity among these heroes.

Children of all backgrounds should have positive representation of themselves in the media. There should be individuals from all ethnic backgrounds portrayed. The media needs to respond to the global interconnectedness that the world is experiencing, because having only certain ethnic groups portrayed in the media can create prejudices and stereotypes of other groups. Most importantly, when portraying individuals of different backgrounds, it is crucial to portray them in a manner that does not fuel stereotypes but rather have them as a positive role models for children.

Another diversity characteristic that should be examined in future research is that of disabilities. Though there are a few characters such as Professor X from X-men and Daredevil who represent heroes with disabilities, it is still a minority group. There needs to be a wider range of portrayals of heroes so that no one children do not feel they are excluded from the representation. Further evaluation would also need to be conducted to explore causes for prejudice and stereotyped images in the media. In our sample, numerous participants stated that diversity is not necessary, but it would be beneficial to understand that frame of thinking. Limitations of the study include unequal male and female participants, small sample size, and only Southern California university students.