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Cool heroes or funny freaks

Why certain programmes and TV characters appeal to boys

One point which has been totally neglected so far in gender research is boys and their preferences concerning TV. For the first time, scientists who research on boys introduce the combined results of their long-time research here.

Why do boys watch such junk ...?" This question often arises when adults seek to understand which TV characters appeal to boys – particularly when they harbour objections against the character concerned. This question arises among parents, especially mothers, because they fail to comprehend their son's enthusiasm about heroes or because they feel his development is at risk. Pedagogues attach a certain criticism of traditional masculinity structures to boys' character preferences. Media educators and television producers, mainly those from non-profit networks, are baffled by the fact that boys do not seem to respond to well-intended, high-quality programmes – boys prefer what at first glance appears to be less sophisticated content. The preconceptions: the characters that appeal to boys are problematic, because they are anti-social, uneducated, or have a propensity for violence. Furthermore, they are designed in a one-dimensional, invariable, simple fashion.

However, it could be determined through empirical research that while very many boys – indeed the major-

ity – enjoy such heroes, they are quite well-developed with regard to their social interactions: they are creative and able to communicate, and they solve conflicts co-operatively and verbally rather than with fist or weapon. From a sober and detached point of view we need first to acknowledge that these heroes obviously seem to have something about them that boys like to watch – and that certain programmes, series, and channels meet their demand more than others.

Research question and approach

This vantage point and hypothesis also determines our approach: we look at boys' heroes through "the eyes of boys" and at the same time from the perspective of interpretative, empathetic boys studies, that is to say non-judgementally and from a structural-analytical angle. In doing so we also enquire about the functions these characters have in boys' everyday life management and about the meaning boys ascribe to their heroes. From this basis we reconstruct aspects and topics which are of interest and appeal to boys and which they like about their favourite heroes. The research question with which we approach boys' relevant heroes is: What is it about them that delights boys? And how can this be captured systematically, in a model draft? These enquiries should also help to answer the abovementioned question often

posed with an air of alarm by dismayed educators.

The development of the model presented in the following continues our earlier work on the issue of characters appealing to boys (cf. references). It is important to note that we are not speaking of "boys" as a homogenous group, since there is no such thing. We looked at boys aged between 9 and 11 years. They were in a very specific stage in their lives: (sociologically) they are "kids" whose physical and psycho-social development is still prepubescent – not children anymore, but not yet teenagers (cf. Kolip, 1997, p. 85).

Study 1: Character qualities from boys' point of view

The IZI research project "boys and their favourite TV characters" investigated character reception and self-reflection of boys with regard to gender identity and lifeworld context. It was the aim of this sub-study to identify action-guiding themes and the most significant characters for boys (favourite characters) in their late childhood between the age of 9 and 11 and to describe the meaning they have for boys.

The study was focussed around unstructured, topic-centred interviews conducted with 45 boys from East and West Germany with different social and educational backgrounds. The boys were asked to talk about

their television viewing habits, favourite topics and characters, and about the way they understand and interpret “their” preferred characters. Boys at this age tend not to be very talkative. Once they had identified and explained the character from their point of view, the subject for them was exhausted. The characters’ meaning for boys was then reconstructed from these interviews, which, incidentally, were much shorter compared to the interviews conducted with girls (cf. Götz, 2006, and Götz in this issue). The result of this study can be summarised in three points:

- *Solution characters appeal – problem characters do not*

Most boys at that age have little interest in the profound, highly differentiated presentation of problems and characters exposed to them. Instead, they respond more strongly to solution processes and problem management even if they are challenging and at times adverse. A brief introduction to the problem which outlines the context in which the character acts is enough for this purpose.

- *Action characters appeal – talky characters do not*

Boys are attracted by characters who provide “compressed communication” rather than those who consider things from all sides in a talky manner. Lengthy conversations on the status quo and the unfolding of relationships are usually deemed boring and uninteresting by boys.

- *Characters who take action, tackle problems, and achieve things appeal*

Active characters appeal to boys – regardless of whether they fail or succeed. This activity should also be tangible: characters performing tricks and stunts, a fast-moving car, a criminal who is apprehended and arrested.

With respect to TV characters boys between the age of 9 and 11 are more interested in a pithy, focussed reflection. Communication of a commenting nature is permitted unless it is (all) about pointed and thus limited issues of interpersonal relationships. Boys assess as positive “their” characters’ relating to their environment in a variety of ways: clarifying the issue at hand, organising co-operation, managing tasks, dissociating themselves from “the others”, sorting out relationships. Boys appreciate the variety of social relationships and are repelled by relationship analysis which is reduced to verbal communication. Their idea of communication is not clarifying discussion, but more activity-related and action-oriented. The status of the characters, which is what is important to them, is achieved by their advancing the plot, not solely by verbal discussion as is found, for instance, in many daily soaps.

Study 2: What makes characters popular with boys?

In the next step the protagonists of the television programmes most pop-

ular among boys were analysed¹ and compared with the protagonists of some of the “Prix Jeunesse International” award-winning television films. As a basis for this we used a model about favourite characters typical for boys developed in the context of study 1 which was later refined using the new material (cf. Winter/Neubauer, 2006). In the following section we will illuminate the “subtypes” into which TV characters popular with boys can be divided. Unfortunately there is only space to briefly go into the reasons why certain characters have this appeal.

Status themes: hurdles and yardsticks

Many of the characters appreciated by boys are more or less permanently exposed to challenging situations: whether they are clowns, losers, or anti-heroes such as Bart Simpson, Donald Duck, or Jerry, or whether they are heroes, warriors, and action characters such as Yugi from *Yu-Gi-Oh!* or Son Goku from *Dragonball Z* – it is the challenge that these favourite characters have in common. Figuratively speaking they need to clear

hurdles or deal with high standards in order to measure up to requirements. They are challenged to fight, they have a mission to fulfil and villains to chase, and must prove themselves in war or raids, perform well in school, and so forth. There are substantially 3 ways of dealing with standards, requirements, and hurdles:

- 1 Meeting them by “getting over” them.
- 2 Handling them by “getting under” them.
- 3 Questioning the standard itself.

This 3rd variant, the questioning of authority, is the one that interests boys least. Questions such as “Who sets these requirements in the first place? Are they justified? Why does the character need to meet them?” play no great part. Instead, the quality boys appreciate in their characters is their action-orientation and their mastery of the task at hand: they must measure up.

1. “Getting over”: *the little one can do it*

The type of character who wants to make it “over the hurdle” and meet the requirements is usually the fighter – often precisely the little one who is expected to be the easy-to-defeat

“little fighter”. Yugi from the series *Yu-Gi-Oh!* is regarded by some boys as the prototype for this character category. The attraction is not fuelled by cost-what-it-may victory, but rather fair fighting or the fight with a just cause. As a character who seeks to get over the hurdle Yugi represents the theme-complex: “Am I strong and powerful enough? Can I meet the normative, performance-related requirements? Can I measure up?”. While “getting over”-heroes time and again pull off outstanding accomplishments – “acts of heroism” indeed – they never win sufficient praise and sustaining recognition to be awarded a permanently higher status. In most cases the next challenge is already lurking around the corner (e. g. in the next episode).

Further differentiations of “Getting over”

What “getting over”-characters have in common is that it is structures on the macro-level of society that appear to be under threat. “The whole” is at stake here, and unless they give everything in their power, something dramatic is going to happen. The characters’ actions can be encountered in the presentations of the popular heroes in twofold ways, allowing us to distinguish the two sub-types: “action figures” and “global-law figures”. Action figures are entirely focussed on their activity and action; they are go-getters who fulfil their missions and perform acts of heroism. Their efficacy is reflected primarily in their actions. Spiderman (from the eponymous TV series) is one such action hero of the “getting over”-type. Getting it done “without any doubt” is paramount for him – anything that might impede his actions (ambivalences, second thoughts, contemplation, resistances) is eliminated. Time and again he makes mistakes, gets fooled or led up the garden path – but never mind, he tries harder next time, hoping not to make a mistake again (trial and error

method). His motto is: “Everything will flow, if only you keep going.” Yugi, on the other hand, is the type of “getting over”-character who adopts and pursues the “global-law” aspect. To preserve or restore the threatened order the focus is not on mere action, but primarily on the ability to understand the rules and regularities behind this order. Only then can activities be carried out effectively and purposefully. Yugi manages at least partially to work through team effort, which requires social and reflective skills. While Spiderman is a lone fighter, *Yu-Gi-Oh!* concerns friendship, reliability, and standing by one another in the face of continuing threats.

2. “Getting under”: *the strengths of the losers and anti-heroes*

Characters who fail to meet requirements, who cheat, or sneak “underneath” also have a peculiar appeal to boys and present a different quality. In their own way they are fit and strong: they get up again when they have been knocked down, make light of every situation, they can always think of something stupid, and they invariably manage to escape adverse situations. Even though they fail to comply with the norms – and this includes the desired “norm of masculinity” –, even though they “do not amount to much” measured against social standards, they make something happen – though it may only be chaos and misfortune. They nevertheless have the ability to get things moving.

A prototype of such a character is Bart Simpson. He fools about, is punished time and again, and yet finds his way out of the situation although chaos is breaking loose around him. Bart Simpson does not accomplish anything, yet he is presumptuous and drives other people crazy. His strength is the art of sneaking through underneath – without throwing in the towel in the process. The appealing quality of this character type for boys

Boys' topic	Boys' interest
aggression – both in its "good" manifestation in the sense of "attacking a task", going about something, entering conflicts with vigour and so forth and in its more problematic or threatening manifestation in the sense of violence	The issue of aggression concerns boys in their everyday life; this is, on the one hand, with regard to their own behaviour (how to deal with their aggressive impulses, the cultivation of their aggressions, or the fine line between aggression and violence); on the other hand they live in a world in which they are threatened by violence – from peers, adults, but also e. g. from traffic – or in which violence is presented as a means to assert interests.
hero's friendship with other characters – lasting friendship which helps solve problems, particularly in dangerous situations	In late childhood and adolescence boys relate very strongly to their peers of the same sex due to the growing detachment from their family; they wonder what it is like to have a friend, to be somebody's friend, what responsibilities this entails, how friendship can be made to last, and so forth. Their heroes show them the potentials of friendship that, in real life, they can often only sense.
social references within the group, clique, team, among peers, and system balance in group references	Alongside individual friends it is the peer group, those of the same age and the same sex, that is pivotal to boys. In connection with their favourite characters boys are primarily interested in the potential inherent in successful group contexts: what great things is a (small) group able to accomplish?
generation theme (father-son-dynamics)	Beginning with adolescence boys' generational position and generation consciousness changes. They are no longer child-like, but they are turning into adolescents and grown-ups. The separation from and positioning against the mother – deducing from the boys' topics – seems less interesting in this regard than the father-son-relationship which is dealt with in many of the boys' favourite programmes.
crisis, failure, defeat	Their heroes may ultimately succeed in managing crises and preventing full-blown failure, yet boys are still curious: How do they handle these? This parallels the lifeworld of, especially, young boys in that they still need to appropriate this new life cycle and its rules, etc. Crises, failure, and defeat are part of it. Again, it is likely the potential that boys are interested in: What follows failure? Will I make it in the end?
dominance-reversal: hero is "diminutive, but superior"	Boys frequently encounter situations in real life in which they are small and inferior. This makes the reversal rather appealing to them: the little hero as the "actually" superior one (e. g. Detective Conan: the great mind in the small body).

Table 1: Boys' topics that are addressed in TV programmes and the interest 9- to 11-year-old boys take in it

is that it makes headway by wangling its way past the obstacle with some crafty manoeuvring, without losing his status in the process. Despite all odds such characters remain authentic, are unbroken by their relentless failures, the chaos they create, and the misfortune they encounter. This type communicates to boys the upside of not meeting requirements, of staying true to their own style, and of being authentic. Thus, failing is presented as a competence and a positive approach to life.

Further differentiations of "Getting under"

"Getting under"-characters have in common that what seems to be under threat is on the social micro-level; it is struggle and chaos on a small scale. Their orientation can be directed in either of two ways: it refers either to a later biographical stage (from the perspective of the boys), thus "forward" – one stage of development further or even into mature adulthood –, or to an earlier developmental stage which the character has already passed through, thus to childhood,

that is, the character is child-like or even better: moored to childhood.

Accordingly, a distinction between "forward-heroes" and "backward-heroes" is possible. An exemplary forward-hero is SpongeBob. He wants to move on, grow up and work, yet at the same time his developmental level is that of a child and he shrinks from "adult" responsibilities. Again and again he overshoots the mark with his tendencies toward overgeneralisation, overproduction, and hyper-activity, and he falls back precisely because of that. SpongeBob "celebrates" the "getting under". Weakness is emphasised and rejoiced in, for instance by demonstratively stressing what is embarrassing which, in turn, relieves it of its embarrassing effect: weakness is turned into actual strength. He shines in the delight he takes in pure activity and activism, in which reflection is entirely absent. In his efforts, however, he can also be sure of his companion Patrick's support.

The forward-hero Jimmy Neutron, in turn, invents brilliant things and in doing so even surpasses his father – yet mishaps occur continuously, since he is never quite in control of the situation and unintended side effects crop up.

Bart Simpson or Andy from Disney's *What's With Andy?* on the other hand, being backward-heroes, could be expected to be on a much more mature performance level than they are. Like Bart Simpson, Andy only uses his creative potential for destructive purposes by playing tricks on others that ultimately lead to chaos. When he is up to his nasty and foolish pranks, he acts just like a little boy whom no one can take seriously at all.

Television characters and their themes

The basic types just differentiated illustrate the construction of a character. In the themes dealt with when the

characters are in tricky situations or when problems and conflicts occur, we can detect considerable motivic and dramaturgical variety in this basic structure of heroic figures. The TV characters that are popular with boys embrace a whole series of exemplary “boys’ topics” which are treated and dealt with through them.

What boys are obviously concerned about

Hero characters act out a variety of themes that concern the everyday experience of boys. These are true-to-life themes which boys appropriate at this age and which they need to cope with or “transform” in their adolescence. Venting aggression, for instance, is permissible in childhood in a different way than it is in adulthood; there is a certain tension between permissible male violence (for a good cause, e. g. police, army) and the condemnation of violence as, for instance, a way of solving conflict or acquiring property. Boys’ topics correspond with interests of boys which are tied to their lifeworlds and developmental stages.

Hence, concluding from the television character analysis, we can assume a relationship between boys’ topics, presented clearly by the hero characters that boys favour, and the developmental tasks and life-cycle-specific issues that concern them (see table 1).

Hidden themes concerning boys

Beyond the more obvious topics that concern boys often lie more deeply hidden themes located on a psychological level. These can scarcely be directly asked about, yet anybody who works with boys will confirm that they are more or less intensely concerned with such topics or their background.

The following 7 themes were found to feature conspicuously and rather consistently in all of the popular hero types and series:

Action-orientation: activity clearly has priority over reflection. With respect to action “savant syndrome”, or accidental expertise, is positively connoted.

Solution-orientation: problems do not play a role in the presentations of the protagonists; instead solutions are pointed out. It seems of particular importance that this is done in a way that preserves the dignity of the protagonist: problems do not lead to the hero’s loss of power, but to the solution of the problem.

Liberation from difficulties: The emphasis on action and solution orientation prevents problematisation. Apparently, boys like to see (and perhaps even be) “copers and solvers” – which does not mean: victors, offenders, or attackers.

Dominance and distance communication: Especially between antagonists communication often marks a (desired) dominance or distance. Part of this communication includes the attempt to downgrade the potential of the respective antagonist (ridicule and spite).

Postponed sexuality, love, eros: While the spectrum of topics surrounding love and sexuality is continuously taken up, the latter are curiously prevented and hindered. The motto seems to be: “forbearance is not acquittance”. The appropriation and coping with sexual issues seems to interest boys particularly when it involves the possibility of “defer-

ment” (latency). Time and again sexuality is insinuated (e. g. by gushing), but then reasonably deferred (in the case of Detective Conan, for instance, because of the protagonist’s physical transference to childhood).

Developmental lead of same-aged girls: While girls’ developmental lead is dealt with, this is done – surely quite different from harsh reality – without embarrassing or disgracing boys and their developmental “disadvantage”. Thus, Kim Possible can be regarded as positive female projection as far as the way she treats her friend and team-mate Ron Stoppable is concerned.

Father-centred engagement with masculinity: Protagonists’ fathers are conspicuously often partially deprived of their power – e. g. ridiculed – or handicapped with very obvious weaknesses. This weakened paternal character possibly boosts boys’ potential to “prevail against” their own father and to become better, bigger, or smarter than he is.

These hidden themes can be enacted and varied through boys’ topics. Suspension is created by interleaving these themes or when situationally conflicting expectations resulting from these themes need to be balanced out.

Recommendation: broadening characters for boys

Adults’ criticism of TV characters (and programmes) that appeal to boys often concerns the restriction to male stereotypes or facets of these. The implied solution seems to be to eliminate from characters and programmes even the slightest insinuation of facets of male stereotypes. But in doing so, these characters and programmes lose their attraction to boys. If, however, we work with the model of balanced masculinity (cf. Winter/Neubauer, 2001) we shed the fixation

on stereotypes and begin to follow other, perhaps more value-free paradigms. One-dimensional imbalance is also problematic; the aim, however, is to produce a “more” rather than a “less”. A character improves through gaining something, not by being deprived of something good and successful.

Put into practice this can appear as follows: The aspect of “performance” concerns the capacity to be productive, to advance and manage things, and to comply with performance norms. This entails the capacities and skills needed to accomplish things as well as ideas and passions of expressing oneself in the world. When a character – such as a one-dimensional “action hero” – is reduced to the aspect of performance, this can quickly turn into slightly mindless activity, work-mania, pure functioning, often under stress or high pressure. Characters such as these lack a buffer and a counterbalance. The complementing aspect that gives performance its lasting quality is relaxation: the capacity and art of idleness, resting, and letting go. Characters that are reduced to and built around performance gain by integrating relaxation. Such characters are shown unwinding and regenerating their energies: a Kung Fu fighter, for example, meditates before the big fight, eats an ice cream, while talking to his friend or with a child.

Or using the pair activity/reflection: “Activity” refers to the competence of taking-action, instigating, doing and being active. Its antagonist in the balance model is “reflection”; reflection qualifies this aspect (and vice versa!) and concerns the thinking and reflecting about an action prior to and after its implementation. He who only or primarily reflects does not get to act. Now, if it is the aspect “activity” that particularly captures boys’ imagination at the age when they are kids, it hardly makes sense to overemphasise and overstress the aspect of reflection (as is done in the case of the

film *Secret Thoughts*). It may, however, go to enormously qualify a character in the plot to spice it up – e. g. discretely or by a switch of medium – with carefully dosed reflective moments and to enhance it that way. This is not supposed to block the action, but e. g. should elucidate what inspires the protagonist and what goes on in his mind before, during, and after his action. Conversely, highly reflective characters can significantly gain in attraction to boys, if they are also shown at least in equal measure to be action-oriented.

To conclude, the aim is neither to deprive characters of their competences and strengths, nor to render them boring through exaggerated balance. It is rather a question of finding the right measure of counterbalance. A male character that is designed to be always norm-conforming and law-abiding is improved by the occasional clash with norms and regulations – perhaps out of compassion or for a greater cause. An ever-strong character is made more authentic and ultimately even stronger if it sometimes reaches its limits. This way characters maintain and gain both: components attractive to boys and a specifically male broadening – a combination which equally offers boys the appealingly familiar as well as the innovatively challenging in relation to images of masculinity. ■

NOTES

¹ In the context of an IZI research workshop held in July 2007, using the representative survey conducted by iconkids & youth, Munich, Germany which was commissioned by the IZI.

² Such characters can also be found for adults where they “function” as well (such as, for instance, *Loriot’s* male characters).

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