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Teens, sexual diversity and TV

Same-sex orientation and quality TV

One dimension of diversity is sexual diversity, e.g. same-sex attraction. This article argues that, although being an intimate issue, we should bring it up in quality TV. Findings from a study with teens on 2 PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL programmes with gay protagonists give insights into reception.

One dimension of diversity is sexual diversity which deals with differences between people in terms of whom they feel sexually attracted to: to the other sex, to the same sex, to both sexes, and some people do not feel any sexual attraction at all.¹ These are intimate issues and in many cultures sexuality is something which should not be addressed publicly. Why should we give attention to same-sex behaviour in quality TV?

Western industrialized countries place same-sex behaviour in the context of the individual's sexual orientation. At the age of 10 to 13 young people begin to think more seriously about their own sexual identity. Around 5 % of males and females discover that they are definitely attracted to a person of the same sex, and are labelled (or label themselves) "homosexual" or "gay". This means children develop these feelings in puberty – even though they may "come out" to their family or peers at a much later date. More and more programmes – on commercial channels (Davis, 2004; Wyatt, 2008), but also shown at the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL festival – take up this topic. However, there

are only few reception studies about the issue (e.g. Buckingham/Bragg, 2004). In an IZI study we asked what teens in Germany thought about 2 documentations on gay young people, *Danny's Parade* from the Netherlands (cf. also Schlote et al., 2009) and *Gay Pride* from Ireland. We present some findings from our study below, and draw conclusions for the representation of gay teenagers on TV.

Other cultures do not categorize sexual attraction into homo- and heterosexual the way Western cultures do. Societies found different ways to deal with same-sex attraction, some do not classify it, others distinguish traditionally e.g. a third category of gender for androgynous males who engage with men (e.g. Hijras in India, cf. Nanda, 1990). When considering ways to represent sexual diversity, programme makers should reflect on their cultures' stances on this topic. It is important to help teenagers understand the issue of same-sex attraction, especially in the context of sexual education and health programmes (e.g. HIV/AIDS prevention, cf. UNESCO, 2009).

The Western perspective

Homosexuality is romantic or sexual attraction or behaviour among members of the same sex. There is a scarcity of statistical facts on how many gay people there are, partly because homosexuality is penalized in some countries or socially unacceptable.² This is why researchers rely on quantitative studies on homosexuality from the 1990s in the US and Europe.

Same-sex orientation

- An estimated 5 % of people are homosexual, i.e. 1 in 20.
- A person cannot be "seduced" to a homosexual orientation.
- Preteens become aware of same-sex orientation during puberty.

Inferring from these data, 3.5 % to 5 % of the total population in a country have a homosexual orientation (cf. Dannecker, 2000, p. 336).

There is an ongoing academic debate about how same-sex orientation develops. Sexual orientation is a complex process, a combination of biological, developmental psychological, interpersonal, biographical and social constructivist aspects (ibid., p. 340). It's not just "the genes", and it's definitely not the parents' educational styles that "make" people identify themselves as lesbian or gay. Essential homosexuality is characterized by manifest homosexual desires that precede homosexual practices. Occasional homosexual behaviour, e.g. during puberty, without true homosexual desire, is transitional and of no self-perceived importance (ibid., p. 338). Thus, a person cannot be "seduced" to homosexuality.

A majority of male gay respondents in the US and Germany reported same-sex attractions prior to or at the beginning of puberty, at an average age of 8 to 13 years (cf. Savin-Williams, 1998; Grossmann, 2000). Homosexual African-American and Latina women in the US wondered at an average age of 14 years about being a lesbian (cf. Parks et al., 2004). Thus,

development of same-sex attraction advances in parallel to heterosexual sexual development.

TV and gay teens

In the last 20 to 30 years, many countries have liberalized their laws on homosexuality, and societies have opened up towards gay people. However, this mainly relates to adults. Pre-teens get aware of their homosexual identity during puberty, like the majority of their heterosexual peers – but this is scarcely mentioned. Homosexual youth seem to be non-existent in society and the media, which offer copious examples of heterosexual role models.

Being a marginalized minority, and feeling “different” from their peers, these teens are at risk of mental health problems. Many suffer from loneliness and depression. Young men are at a higher risk of committing suicide than their peers (cf. Fergusson, 1999; Vanden Berghe et al., 2010, and references therein). Much of it can be attributed to unsupportive social interactions, from mere disregard to bullying in school. Mental well-being depends on sympathetic support from friends and social acceptance of their homosexual identity (which the teenagers cannot change at will, and have to learn to accept and live with).

Teen-oriented programmes may provide examples to audiences who do not get information about homosexuality from more traditional sources of education (cf. Davis, 2004). Recent years saw an increase of teen gay protagonists on commercial TV in Western countries, e.g. in the series *Dawson's Creek*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* from the US, or in the British show *As if*. These representations were remarkably positive, showing ordinary characters in their everyday life (ibid., p. 135). In the context of quality TV, at the PRIX JEUNESSE

INTERNATIONAL festival, 2 documentaries addressed the topic:

Danny's Parade. The Dutch documentary centres on 14-year-old Danny and his socio-political involvement. Being gay, Danny does not only want to be accepted by his private environment. He also wants public visibility for homosexual teens. This is why he fights for teenagers under 16 to share their own boat in the Channel Parade in Amsterdam. The media cover Danny's story, a TV channel invites him. A vivid public discussion unfolds about whether gay teenagers should draw that much public attention to their sexual identity. In the end, Danny is able to gather enough teenagers under 16 to fill a boat on “his” parade.

On trial: Gay Pride. 19-year-old Irishman Jeff takes a critical view on street parades like the Gay Pride in Dublin: although they make homosexual people visible, he feels they reinforce public stereotypes, instead of rendering gays “normal”. Jeff himself does not conform to gay roles like “gym bunny” or “drag queen”. He puts these stereotypes to the test and confronts people in the gay community with his opinion: they just hide behind these roles. At the same time he investigates how society reacts to men being openly gay.

His conclusion is to move away from a minority perspective that advances special gay rights to a general human rights perspective.

The study

In 2009/10 we conducted group discussions with 99 teenagers aged between 13 and 17 in 3 German cities upon watching *Danny's Parade* or *Gay Pride*. We asked pupils from schools of higher education and basic-level secondary school, with and without an immigration background.³

We also held group discussions with 32 participants in Munich, with gay teenagers (15 to 23 years old) on *Danny's Parade* and young homosexual people (20 to 28 years old) on both documentations.

Young gay respondents:

The young men and women agreed that it is important to have these kinds of programmes on TV, but differed in their opinions about *Danny's Parade* and *Gay Pride*. They unequivocally liked *Danny's Parade* and enjoyed watching it. Some stated it was empowering, e.g. seeing Danny write a letter to his parents. “This would have been majorly helpful for my coming out” (18-year-old). A few criticized not seeing

the different steps in setting up the boat, and organizations that supported Danny.

However, they had a hard time liking Jeff. Many felt he was exaggeratedly “normal” and undedicated. Some liked how he questioned things, but many thought he was no advocate for their cause. Respondents agreed that the documentation was directed at (older) gay people who were already secure in their identity: “He posed questions 16-year-old Danny didn't ask”, e.g. on legal aspects and marriage.

Teenagers in schools:

Many reported seeing young gay people for the first time, and felt they should be more tolerant towards them. They liked about Danny and Jeff that they were strong, individual, young characters and were interested in finding out about their families.

Irrespective of their personal opinions on homosexuality, many were impressed by Danny, characterizing him as someone who advances his view, gets things moving. Pupils, especially those with immigration background, questioned how Danny could be so sure about being gay. Mainly socially disadvantaged pupils spoke against

Danny and his campaign. They had a hard time expressing their opinions in the discussions, and resorted to norms from their social background. Watching the programme, they keenly observed the reactions of Danny's peers and parents. A male teen: "He wanted to fill his boat, but many teens' parents were against it." However, it was interesting to these marginalized youth to learn how the parents on TV dealt with his "non-conforming" behaviour. Others, especially those with immigration background in higher-education schools, had developed a great insight and sensitivity because of their own experiences with cultural differences.

Teenagers in schools liked about Jeff that he looked "normal", and that he put his opinions and ideas to test. They were very interested in the reactions Jeff got from the public and discussed his "spontaneous" actions, e.g. taking photographs, calling employers. They put themselves into the public's or Jeff's position and talked about what they had done in this situation. Some complained about not getting enough background information or conclusions, but felt it was a very "young" documentation.

When asked whether this was a programme for their age, most of the pupils stated they didn't know any gay teenagers, and doubted there were any at their age. A male teen on Jeff: "When he was 15 he thought about how to tell his mom. But he is in such a minority with 15. I think this [being gay] applies to nearly nobody." Without being prompted, in both schools pupils started reflecting their own use of the word "gay" as an insult.

Putting it on screen

Teenagers with a gay identity should be represented in the media. Programme makers face the same challenges in depicting all minorities: While you shouldn't reduce characters to the feature that distinguishes them from others, you should not

leave it out completely, either. Some conclusions on the teenage target group:

Try out/test something. Show a process, not set answers. The teenage respondents were interested in different reactions and opinions. Some objective, reliable information, which could explain and contextualize positions, would help this age group. Societal groups and institutions state ambivalent, controversial opinions on this topic, and teenagers need guidelines to evaluate these arguments.

Relate to teenagers' developmental themes. Opening up to their family and dealing with their reactions is a central challenge for gay teens. However, dealing with their family during puberty is something which concerns all teenagers. Other topics that may grow more acute when developing a gay identity but basically concern all: fitting in a peer group, being different with self-confidence, finding true friends, building groups with shared interests. Programmes also have to deal with the possibility that viewers, especially from marginalized groups, might have the strong desire to distance themselves from gay teenagers, perceived as a "low status" group.

Show the diversity in the group. The protagonists Danny and Jeff are differentiated characters, no stereotypes. But gay teens are more diverse than presently shown on TV: Most characters are white, middle-class and individualised (cf. Davis, 2004). What is more, the absence of Lesbian teens repeats their discrimination ("being insignificant and invisible") which differs from gay men's discrimination. ■

NOTES

¹ In contrast to other kinds of sexual attraction this article refers to an attraction which aims at interactions between 2 consenting people who are each other's equal.

² Many cultures oppose homosexuality. Apart from moral concerns, medical psychiatric arguments are brought forward that characterize homosexuality as deviance. In 1973, the American Psychological Association (APA) deleted homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Dannecker, 2000, p. 341), the World

Health Organization removed it from the ICD Catalogue of disorders in 1992.

³ Group discussions were held with pupils in Berlin (6 from a higher-education school, 12 from 2 basic-level schools), Munich (21 from the European School, 11 from a basic-level school), and Hannover (24 from a higher-education school, 25 from a Catholic higher-education school).

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