Framing the Future:
Representation of Arabs in Israeli children's television[1]

Lauren Fein

Arabs in Israeli Society

Stereotypes of Arabs have pervaded Israeli society, and while they may change or disappear over time, many are still prevalent, especially in the context of the current Palestinian-Israeli violence. "Arabs have been stereotyped by means of negative characteristics.... The concept 'Arab' became a symbol of negativity among Jews in Israel referring, among other things, to sloppy work, dirt and stupidity."[1] These stereotypes are caused by a variety of factors. One is the relationship of power in Israel, in which Jews are the dominant majority and Arabs the inferior minority. Another cause is simple racism, a particularly complex issue because Arabs and Jews are mostly of the same race. Another factor is the legacy of war and terrorism that has created a constant state of fear and contempt that serves as a rationale for bigotry.[2]

Due to this history of violent conflict, one of the most pervasive stereotypes of Arabs in Israeli society is the image of the Arab as a "fearsome, violent figure of immense strength and duplicity."[3] This image is analogous to the predatory and warlike image of Native Americans that was once common in the United States. Israeli children's literature was inundated with these images, especially in the decades following the founding of the State. Menachem Regev, an expert on early Israeli children's literature, found that the majority of children's stories published before 1967 portrayed Arabs as "violent, hateful, and simple-minded enough to be incited by their leaders and wooed into peace by the more advanced and cultural Jews."[4] These characterizations influenced the stereotypes of an entire generation of Israelis.

Another particularly common stereotype of Arabs in Israel is that they are both primitive and exotic. Rarely is the image presented of an Arab as an ordinary person living in modern society, despite the relatively modern reality of contemporary Arab lifestyles. Some of the traditions that remain in Arab society, such as the role of the extended "clan" or family, elaborate hospitality rituals, and the somewhat limited role of women, serve as an impetus for the maintenance of this stereotype.[5] Danny Rubinstein, a reporter for the daily newspaper *Davar*, noted that this stereotype was noticeable even at the semantic level in Israeli newspapers. One example is the use of the word "notables" to describe Arab leaders, a classification that invokes a tribal feeling associated with Arab society. Another example of this stereotype is the use of the word "educated" for Arabs, as opposed to the use of the word "intellectual" to describe an Israeli. This suggests that most Arabs are uneducated and that an educated Arab is exceptional.[6] These instances of newspaper language use may seem trivial, but their widespread acceptance is indicative of the social disparity between Arabs and Jews in Israel.

> The concept of "an Arab" can be based on encountering and see-ing an Arab personal-ly or visually through a picture or television, or based on linguistic input from others.

The status of Arabs in Israeli society is readily demonstrated by the coverage and representation of Arabs in the Israeli print media, the oldest and most well-established media institution in Israel. The events covered or not covered and the portrayals rendered in the print news media also shape societal views, which in turn translate into stereotypes that permeate Israeli society and are absorbed by children. Professor Eli Avraham of Haifa University's Department of Communications reviewed newspaper articles and conducted in-depth interviews with members of the Israeli press. His primary conclusion was that the social-political distance between a given social group and the foci of power is the most significant factor influencing media coverage. "Social groups that were close to the relevant elite received extensive and favorable coverage, while social groups that were distant from the same elite were either ignored or received largely unfavorable coverage."[7]

The media plays a major role in determining the nature of ethnic relations. News groups can create "us" and "them" by infrequently covering marginal minority groups, or by portraying them in relation to the

majority group.[8] Sociologists define the Israeli elite as having the following characteristics: Jewish, Ashkenazi[II], residents of Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, financially well-off, modern Western liberal, educated, pragmatic, pluralist, and pro-individualism and free market.[9] In the Israeli press, "Israeli" means "Jewish." This is reflective not only of the socially dominant status of Jews in Israel, but of the influence of journalists' desire to appeal to the population that constitutes their readership,[10] which is assumed to be primarily Jewish, as there are Arabic newspapers that serve the Arab population.

The three topics most frequently covered concerning the Arab sector all contained elements of violence: crime, hostile security-oriented activities, and demands from the government that are usually manifested in violent protest.[11] These issues reflect and perpetuate Jewish-Israelis' fear of Arab violence. The presentation of these issues also represents Arab communities only in relation to their potential effect on the Jewish population, indicating the insignificance of the Arab community outside of this context. Another example of the reluctance to explore Arab issues outside the frame of their effects on the Jewish population is the lack of reporting on the economic hardships facing the Arab community. Although 97% of Arab cities are in the lowest economic cluster, Avraham found only two articles about poverty in Arab cities over a period of thirty years.[12]

CHILDREN AND STEREOTYPES

Children and youth are not immune to the effects of stereotypes that are present in their society. In fact, they are often the ones that are most likely to be influenced by these stereotypes, as they have no prior information to contradict the ideas conveyed to them by their surroundings. Israeli psychologists have investigated the stereotypic knowledge of children and older youth. Research indicates that Jewish-Israeli children's perceptions about Arabs develop at an early age. Dr. Daniel Bar-Tal of Tel Aviv University is responsible for considerable work regarding stereotypes in Israeli society. Bar-Tal studied the development of social categories and stereotypes in early childhood, particularly pertaining to the formation of the concept of "the Arab."[13,14]

Concepts or categories of social groups form at a very early stage of life. Initial categorizations are based on both visual characteristics such as skin color, facial features, or clothing. Children also learn a great deal of social concepts from their social environment without seeing an exemplar.[15] Words come to symbolize social groups such that a child hearing the word

---

[II] of Eastern European descent

"Arab" creates an image of the particular group and retrieves stereotypical characteristics associated with the group. Children begin relying on well-known characteristic features of any given concept by the age of three or four years.[16] Additionally, the formation of social group categories relies heavily on cultural beliefs that society has about the categorized group members. During development, children learn these adult theories about the world and integrate them into their categorization and stereotyping processes.[17]

Bar-Tal's research focused on the stereotypes of Jewish-Israeli kindergarten children. He points to the concept of "an Arab" as one of the most meaningful social concepts for Israeli Jews besides that of their own social group. Israeli children begin to use the word "Arab" between the ages of 24 months and 30 months.[18] The concept of "an Arab" can be based on encountering and seeing an Arab personally or visually through a picture or television, or based on linguistic input from others. Stereotypes can be based on linguistic input without the child having seen an exemplar. Children mechanically learn the label and characteristics without necessarily realizing that they refer to a group of people.[19]

Related studies found that kindergartners reported multiple sources of information about Arabs when asked, "Who told you about Arabs?" Ovadia reported that 86.7% of children interviewed name television as a source of information about Arabs, 80.6% mentioned at least one parent, and 28.1% named school as their source.[20,21] These children lived in mostly Jewish neighborhoods where Jews and Arabs rarely meet. Israeli-Diner questioned children

> One study found that 86.7% of Jewish-Israeli children interviewed name "television" as a source of information about Arabs.

from the mixed Arab-Jewish neighborhood in Jaffa.[22] Only 10.3% of these children named television as a source, while 35.3% mentioned parents and 44.1% mentioned kindergarten.[23] These findings are indicative of the role that children's daily environments have on their formation of social group concepts. Research also indicated that with age (2.5-6.5 yrs), stereotypes of "the Arabs" become more negative, and Jewish children are less willing to have contact with Arabs.[24]

Another interesting study run by Bar-Tal, Teichman, and Zohar involved having kindergarten-age Jewish-Israeli children draw "an Arab" and "a Jew" using colored pencils.[25] In general, Jews were drawn in greater detail than Arabs, including more facial features. The pictures of Jews also more

commonly had hair, hands, and fingers, and were drawn in lighter colors. In general, the pictures of Arabs tended to be more blurred, less distinct, and less positive.[26] Although the differences were not highly significant, verbal questioning following the drawings revealed that 40% of the children thought that "an Arab" was a bad person.[27] This demonstrates that although young children may not differentiate highly between Arabs and Jews in appearance, they recognize Arabs as members of a separate social category with mostly negative characteristics.

The Bar-Tal findings indicate a variety of information about the way that children learn, process and develop stereotypic information that facilitates their social categorization of Arabs. The research mainly indicates that the word "Arab" carries a negative meaning that activates a primed response to the word. Although children may not be able to distinguish an Arab from a Jew, once an Arab is identified as such, the negative associations learned early in life attached to the label "Arab" cause the child to make negative attributions to the Arab.[28] These findings make a strong argument for the importance of early intervention in the stereotype development of children before the term "Arab" permanently carries negative connotations.

Stereotypes and Television

As demonstrated by Ovadia's findings, television can play a large role in Israeli children's acquisition of information about Arabs. Although very little research has been done specifically exploring the role of television and stereotypes in Israeli society, important research has been conducted in the U.S. regarding portrayals of ethnic minorities in American television. Although the nature of intergroup conflict in the U.S. is slightly less extreme than the more violent relations between some groups of Israelis and Arabs, this research lends a great deal to understanding how television can play a role in the stereotyping of the Arab minority in Israel.

Sherryl Browne Graves argues that television functions as a source of vicarious racial experiences, especially in situations where there is little intergroup contact.[29] She also outlines a number of theories that offer explanations of how the presence of stereotyped characters or the total exclusion of racial characters contributes to the development, maintenance, or modification of attitudes and behavior in children. Cultivation theory suggests that television content provides a stable view of society that creates a picture of acceptable social behavior, norms, and structure.[30] According to this theory, television becomes the social reality of the viewer. If images are not present on television, viewers may believe that the absent group is powerless or unimportant.[31]

Constructivism is a theory that suggests that children develop a set of cognitive schema to explain and encode their life experiences. Television images are selectively attended to or ignored depending on the relevance of the image to the child's pre-existing schemata. Therefore, constructivist theory predicts that children will pay more attention and better remember racial information that conforms to their existing racial schemata. When racial information presented on television is incongruent with a child's schemata, the child may distort the information provided to fit with their pre-existing beliefs.[32]

Where children lack real-life intergroup experiences, information from television is used to create a cognitive schema.[33] For example, some studies indicated that white children living in a rural setting in the U.S. use television as a main source of information about different racial and ethnic groups. In some situations, any exposure to black characters caused more positive attitudes about blacks.[34]

One final theory that is applicable to the potential role of television in Israel is social cognitive theory. Children learn from others, so social cognitive theory predicts that child viewers may imitate role models on television. Role models can therefore be effective in stereotype development or modification when they are "...perceived as attractive, trustworthy, competent, and similar to the viewer."[35] These traits are particularly important for cross-race models. This concept can also be important for modeling intergroup interactions when children are not exposed to them in their everyday life.

These theories suggest that television, especially children's programming, can play a vital role in the development or modification of stereotypes in children. Therefore, it is necessary to explore and critique society's media content and explore what messages are being conveyed to children, and how those messages support or counteract the stereotypes that children may be learning from their parents, society, or simply from a lack of interactions with members of outgroups.

CHILDREN'S TELEVISION IN ISRAEL

Israeli television currently features a wide variety of programming for children of all ages. Channels 1, 2, and 32 air the children's programming components of Israeli Educational Television and Israel TV, primarily in the morning hours. Programming on these stations is aimed at children of many ages. *The Children's Channel (Arutz ha Yeladim)* is Channel 6. The children's channel features programming for older children, including the

popular show *Pokemon*, and other Japanese animations such as *DragonBall-Z*. Channel 6 also produces youth-oriented music and variety shows as well as serial programs aimed at older children.[36] Similar content is available on satellite networks such as *Fox Kids Israel*, which is geared towards older children.

The *Hop!* network provides programming specifically aimed at 1-7 year old children. *Hop!* is a newer channel, one of the many channels that has emerged in Israel since the popularization of cable television in the mid-1990s. According to their website, *Hop!* reaches 1.4 million homes as a part of all of Israel's basic cable packages and claims an 88% share of the target audience during prime time hours.[37] The self-proclaimed goals of the channel focus on the positive influences that they believe television can have in the lives of young children. *Hop!* officially claims that the shows on the channel are violence-free, offer positive role models, encourage active community participation, and are "specially suited to the cognitive and emotional abilities of young children."

The format of *Hop!* is particularly intriguing and demonstrates the large role that television can play in the lives of children. *Hop!* broadcasts daily from 5:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m., the hours in which children are most likely to be awake. The broadcast schedule is also specially adjusted to a typical daily routine of a family. In the morning, a cartoon clock says goodbye to one of the characters as they "go off to school." In the evening, animated sequences

> Where children lack real-life intergroup experiences, information from television is used to create a cognitive schema.

and songs remind children to take a bath or brush their teeth. Promptly at 8:00 p.m. each evening, the channel says goodnight to its viewers and reminds them to turn off the TV. The programming itself is also geared towards the appropriate activity for that time of day. For example, the show *A Bedtime Story for Nimi* (*Sippurim L'Nimi*)[III] features a young girl who reads popular children's stories, much like the American *Reading Rainbow*. This is the final show each day and is intended to serve as a bedtime story for child viewers.

Approximately 25% of *Hop!* air time consists of shows and series produced by *Hop!* including dramas such as *Dafna, Dodidoo and Friends*,

---

[III] This name is also a play on words. The name Nimi is derived from the Hebrew word meaning "to go to bed."

shows that encourage activity such as *1,2,3, Hop!,* and *A Bedtime Story for Nimi*. Additionally, *Hop!* produces its own specials about nature and the holidays.[IV] *Hop!* also receives popular children's programming from around the world such as *Shining Time Station*, *Clifford*, and *Bob the Builder*.[38] International programs are dubbed into Hebrew "…under the careful supervision of language experts. Special emphasis is placed on the quality of dubbing and the level of language used, and care is taken that the actors use a calm and friendly tone of voice." The voices used to dub the programs can play a vital role in children's stereotype development,[39] so this aspect of the programming could unintentionally convey stereotypic messages.

Cartoons and programs that feature puppets as main characters present an interesting ground for assessment. Since the purpose of this research is to determine the nature of portrayals of Arabs in Hebrew-language programming, non-human characters can be difficult to analyze. However, there are distinct features that can be ethnic identifiers such as name, accent, or visual features.

An assessment on the basis of these characteristics of main characters in some of *Hop!'s* popular original programming revealed little presence of characters that either were explicitly Arab or had characteristics suggestive of Arab ethnicity. Overall, characters had explicitly Jewish or Jewish sounding names, such as "Nimi." Although Nimi is not a common Hebrew name, it follows the Israeli pattern of names that often have almost direct word correspondence. Nimi is also a light-skinned, red haired child who reads classic Hebrew children's stories. This character is aimed singularly at Jewish-Israeli children. Additionally, as children's literature from earlier decades has been shown to contain stereotyped images of Arabs, it is doubtful that this program provides children with positive exposure to Arabs in any way.

Non-human central characters on *Hop!* programs were generally not ethnically suggestive. Some characters such as Tziki, Shlook, Elik, and Belik[V] have names that are culturally linked to Jewish societal influences. No characters had explicitly Arab names or names that sounded Arabic. Characters from internationally-acquired programs clearly did not have Jewish or Arab names or cultural features. Characters from international shows also probably did not have Arab-inflected Hebrew based on *Hop!'s* stated dedication to articulate Hebrew dubbing, which would infer the use of Ashkenazi-inflected Hebrew, the standard dialect.

[IV] Jewish holidays are implied here
[V] "Elik, Belik, Bom" is the Israeli equivalent of "eenie, meenie, minie, moe"

Preliminary exploration of the other channels that feature children's programming suggests a lack of Arab representation.[40] However, there is Arab-language programming on channels 1, 2, and 32 with Hebrew subtitles, which suggests that when children reach an age at which they can read well, many Arab models are available. This lack of Arab representation perpetuates societal class and power problems. "The limited inclusion of visible racial/ethnic groups in television programming and advertising conveys to children and youth the relative lack of power and importance of these groups in the larger society."[41] This pattern is consistent with the lack of portrayals of Arabs in the Hebrew print media and perpetuates the lower class status of Arabs in Israeli society.

These findings are consistent with the picture of Israeli children's television painted by Dr. Dafna Lemish, head of the Department of Communications at Tel Aviv University, with whom I met during my trip to the Middle East. She outlined four stages of minority representation on television: the first stage is that minorities are not at all present; the second stage includes stereotypic images that are mostly negative or humorous at best; at the third stage, there is a greater awareness of minority characters, but minorities are still represented in token situations; in the fourth stage, there is a diversity of characters that have equal and varied roles. Lemish placed Israeli television, especially children's television, in the first stage.[42] She posited that not only does Israeli television lack representations of the Arab minority, but also of ethnic Jewish minorities such as Russians, Ethiopians, and Mizrachim.[VI] The "standard" representation is that of Ashkenazi, middle-class Jews. Other characters appear at best as token characters.

Lemish also alluded to the "ghettoization" of TV that is a countertrend to globalization and has become prevalent in Israel. Here she refers to the evolution of television aimed specifically at Arab audiences. A similar pattern emerged in American television beginning in the 1990s. Although African-Americans had begun to be featured in mainstream television in non-stereotyped roles, a growth in African-American viewership and their growing role in the market led to the development of more programming aimed specifically at African-American audiences. The result was a fragmentation and re-segregation of programming.[43] In Israel, there are talks of creating an Arab language channel, which Lemish suggests will maintain the current status of Arab representations because there will be even less incentive to include Arab characters in Hebrew shows.

[VI] This term refers to "Eastern" Jews who originated in Spanish speaking or Arab countries

The one initiative that has shown a commitment to representing Arabs in Israeli children's television is *Sesame Stories,* which began production in 1993. *Sesame Street* was a leader in representing minorities in American children's television, as it has featured a diverse cast since the show began. "Traditionally, the diverse people on *Sesame Street* have lived in a racial utopia with no talk about racial or ethnic problems; they simply modeled positive, cordial, and respectful relations and attitudes towards each other."[44] Production teams came to the Middle East in the early 1990s during a time of hope following the Oslo Accords of 1993.

Initiated by Sesame Workshop (formerly Children's Television Workshop), Israeli and Palestinian producers were brought together to produce an Israeli-Palestinian *Sesame Street*. Danny Labin, a senior content researcher for the Israeli-Palestinian initiatives, recalled that a distinct sense of optimism surrounded the initiative that they hoped would play a role in preparing children for a new era of peace.

The show, *Rechov Sumsum/Shara'a Simsim*[VII], contained segments in both Hebrew and Arabic. Palestinian segments were produced by the al-Quds Institute for Modern Media, and the Israeli segments by Israeli Educational Television. Israeli characters lived on Rechov Sumsum, while their Palestinian counterparts lived on the nearby Shara'a Simsim. Crossover segments of the show featured Palestinian and Israeli children visiting each others' neighborhoods and interacting.

Sesame Workshop, in conjunction with its Middle Eastern production partners, did a study to evaluate the effects of the program on Israeli, Palestinian, and Palestinian-Israeli children's social judgments.[45] The study confirmed that children held negative stereotypes about members of other groups that were reflective of the turmoil in the region. However, the children studied were also found to apply their moral concepts of fairness to peer conflict situations between Palestinian and Israeli kids. Although four months of exposure to *Rechov Sumsum/Shara'a Simsim* did not affect the use of negative stereotypes by Palestinian children, Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian-Israeli children used negative words to describe members of the other group less frequently after exposure. Jewish-Israeli children also demonstrated an increase in attributions of everyday life activities to Arabs rather than just to Jews, indicating an enhanced understanding of Arab everyday life. Another interesting result of the study was that they found Jewish-Israeli children displayed a greater understanding of cultural

---

[VII] "Sesame Street" in Hebrew and Arabic

similarity.[46] Overall, the program was judged as valuable in affecting the judgments of Jewish-Israeli children, although more research was needed to conclude how Palestinian children could be better reached.

Sadly, this joint initiative was halted during the early stages of the current *intifada* due to production barriers and the unfortunate reality that Palestinians and Israelis could not live together on the same street or play in the same playgrounds, even on Sesame Street. According to Labin, the production team still had the desire to work together to make the show.

The project re-emerged with Jordan as a new production partner. The format of the show has changed, with individual Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian productions. Each has its own main character and is broadcast entirely in either Arabic or Hebrew. *Sippuray Sumsum* is formatted in the "magazine-style," which is a trademark of Sesame Street Productions. There are animated segments, studio segments with the puppets and humans interacting, and a longer animated story that serves as the foundation for each episode. These animated segments are commonly folklore-based stories that are intended to teach respect and understanding of other cultures.

The shows also share a series of dubbed live-action segments that provide children with normalized images of children in the others' culture. Each production (Jordanian, Israeli, and Palestinian) creates 13 live-action segments that are crossed over to the other two shows. When shown on *Sippuray Sumsum*, the Arabic segments are dubbed into Hebrew with the voice of an Israeli Arab child in order to emphasize that although the segment is in Hebrew, it is about an Arab child. To further reinforce this point, each segment begins with the child narrator introducing themselves by name and hometown, and then says, "This is my story." These cross-over segments counter stereotypes by providing multiple images of people and their lives, which allows children to internalize a spectrum of characteristics that are associated with other people.

Additionally, the Israeli *Sippuray Sumsum* features a Palestinian-Israeli character named Ibtisam ("Smile"), a young woman who lives in the neighborhood. Ibtisam was developed by the production team with the help of an Arab consultant who interviewed Arab citizens in Israel to determine what kind of character they would be proud to have represent them. Both children and teachers were interviewed, and Ibtisam's character reflects those responses. Ibtisam is strong willed, intelligent, and modern, but retains a high respect for her traditions. This balance of traits allows Ibtisam to be a believable character that is an excellent role model. Her presence as a woman makes her role doubly important because she empowers Arab girls.[47]

Ibtisam's interactions with the Jewish character, Tzachi ("Laugh"), and their joint role in assisting the two main puppet characters, Noah and Brosh, with their problems serve as a model for children to begin to accept positive Jewish-Arab interaction. Although they do not always get along, they can resolve their problems by working together. Also, their differences can serve as an educational point. In one episode, Noah and Brosh are fighting because they don't like the exact same things anymore. Ibtisam and Tzachi teach them a lesson by using their own friendship as an example. They first point out that they are different genders, then that they have different lengths of hair, and eventually, point out that they are different nationalities. However, this does not stop them from being friends. Not only does this episode teach Noah and Brosh to value their differences, but it also provides a valuable lesson to the audience, who may have no other reference point for positive Jewish-Arab interaction.

GAN CHOMA: A MODEL FOR FUTURE PROGRAMMING

Israeli children's television has the potential to provide a positive and diverse environment in which both Jewish-Israeli children and minorities can develop positive images of other groups and of intergroup interactions. Jewish children can benefit from normalized Arab and Jewish minority characters, while children from the minority, especially the Arab minority, can see themselves represented equally in the alternate reality created by television. However, with the exception of *Sesame Stories*, this opportunity is not readily available in the current state of Israeli children's programming. With a focus on aspects of children's television that suggest ideal conditions for the development of positive and normalized images of other ethnic groups, I propose an alternative Hebrew language program entitled *Gan Choma*.[VIII]

Gan Choma is a cartoon set within the walls of Jerusalem. This setting combines the familiar and the imaginary. Jerusalem is an easily recognizable location to both Arab and Jewish children and is a place where Jews and Arabs both live. However, in order for an ethnically mixed environment to be somewhat congruent with the children's pre-existing images of the segregated environment that many have experienced, there must be an imaginary component in the setting.

The characters are diminutive, colorful, non-human creatures called

---

[VIII] The title roughly translates to "Kindergarten of the Wall" or "Wall Kindergarten." This is a play on a term for "kindergarten" used in Hebrew, gan chova, which literally translates to "required kindergarten."

"Poofsim" that are comparable in size to dust bunnies.[IX] They are kindergarten-aged, which is similar to the age of the intended audience. These particular colorful dust mites are an ethnically diverse community, although this fact is never stated. There is nothing explicitly ethnic about the characters, per se, but they will possess subtle characteristics that ethnically identify them. The most obvious characteristic that will vary among the characters is their names.

The inflection with which characters speak Hebrew will also indicate their ethnicity. Dafna Lemish pointed to dialect as one of the most important elements of children's television, especially when cartoons or puppets are the main characters. The current accent on Israeli television is a homogenous Ashkenazi-inflected Hebrew. This is potentially one of the most important characteristics of this proposed model. In this model, the use of diverse dialects will not be used to reinforce existing societal stereotypes. The use of multiple dialects in this fantasy world also creates an idealized world in which non-Ashkenazi accents are equally mainstream and do not suggest negative stereotypes.

There are five central characters around which the show revolves. Each episode focuses on one of the characters so that viewers can see into each character's world and see the world from the characters' diverse perspectives. As viewers are able to gain a more complex understanding of each character, they will be less likely to accept generalizations about the character's ethnic group, and they will also experience minority characters beyond the stereotypical level. Additionally, diverse peripheral characters will demonstrate a variety of characteristics across ethnic groups. This is important to prevent the inadvertent creation of singular representations of minority characters.

Two of the main characters are Arab twin sisters named Laila and Sara. These names reflect their implied Arab/Muslim heritage, but also sound similar to Israeli Jewish names, representing shared aspects of the cultures.[X] Sara is an adventurous, talkative, and funny character who rarely refuses a challenge, especially if her challenger suggests that she is limited in any way by being a girl. Laila is an intelligent, cheerful character who laughs at every joke and takes true joy in spending time with her friends and family. Her patience and problem-solving skills perfectly compliment her sister's tendencies to get into sticky situations. These characters represent

---

[IX] According to grammatical structures of the Hebrew language, "Poofsim" refers to the fictional species in the plural. "Poofsi" is the masculine construction, "Poofsa" is the feminine.

[X] Laila means "dark" in Arabic and is a classic name. It is similar to the Israeli name Lila, which means "night" in Hebrew. Sara is a name common to both groups, who each claim Sara, the wife of Abraham, as a matriarch.

a full spectrum of non-stereotypical characteristics; they also represent empowered Arab females, much like Ibtisam of *Sippuray Sumsum*.

Etgar is the new Poofsi in the kindergarten.[XI] He represents the Ashkenazi Jewish-Israeli that is standard in the current media. He is an inquisitive character who loves to find out everything about the world, particularly because he gets bored easily. Etgar never stops asking questions, which sometimes gets annoying. Etgar and Sara became best friends almost immediately on Etgar's first day at the new kindergarten, an event that becomes the premise of the show. During a snack break, Etgar and Sara notice that the other has brought along their own favorite snack. They agree to exchange snacks, and in the process become friends.

The fourth main character is Jacob, a snappy Poofsi whose family is originally from Haifa. Although this is never explicitly stated, as with all things on the show, Jacob has an Arab-Israeli mother and a Jewish-Israeli father. This is indicated when the family is introduced by name at some point in the series and also by the fact that Jacob calls his father "Abba" (Hebrew for "father") and his mother "Umm" (Arabic for "mother"). Jacob loves to play tricks on people and is particularly interested in magic. He never intends harm, but he is always quick to apologize if he hurts anyone's feelings (not that it stops him from being a prankster again). He particularly likes to play tricks on Dina because he thinks it is the only way to get her attention, although he sometimes ends up making her mad.

Dina is a Poofsa with a Russian accent. She is magenta, and her personality reflects her color. She is bright, cheerful, slightly dramatic, and likes to excel at anything she puts her mind to. Dina is Laila's best friend, and they love to go on their own occasional expeditions without their other friends, who tend to get into trouble. Dina was one of the first of the kindergartners to meet Etgar when he moved in, as they are neighbors. She becomes his guide during his early times in the neighborhood. This relationship is particularly important because of the perceived separation of the Russian immigrant community in Israel, which has flourished very independently of Israeli society to the extent that Russian immigrants still rarely use Hebrew in their daily lives. As an immigrant society, Russians were expected to integrate into Israeli society. Dina and Etgar's relationship reveals a subtle role reversal when she introduces Etgar to the neighborhood on her terms.

Gan Choma features the daily lives of these main characters and their classmates, following them on adventures outside the walls in which

---

[XI] Hebrew for "challenge." This name complements his best friend Sara's love of adventure and challenges.

they live. The adventure component of the show uses live footage with superimposed cartoon images.[48] The Poofsim travel together outside of their community on regular field-trips that take them all over Israel in a mini flying *Egged* bus. They travel to numerous places in Israel to learn about the environment, culture, and history of different areas of the country. This provides an educational component for the show, introducing young children to areas of the country with which they may not be familiar.

However, class field trips are not the only way that the Poofsim explore the world outside the walls. The friends have an uncanny ability to literally slip through the cracks into unknown parts of the Old City of Jerusalem. For example, in one episode, the Poofsim could accidentally fall into the beard of an Orthodox man praying at the Western Wall. While they figure out a way to get out of the hairy situation, they see some aspects of the daily life of Orthodox Jews. This would not only be a humorous situation, but it would give the characters and the viewers a chance to explore the diverse cultures that live within the Old City.

Although these adventures are fun and educational, the Poofsim must also be able to find their way home, which requires teamwork. For children who lack models of positive intergroup interaction, these adventures can serve as that model. Also, by having a different character figure out the way home in a creative way each time, all of the ethnic groups represented demonstrate problem-solving abilities, critical thinking skills, the ability to compromise, and self-confidence. These images are important in refuting the claims that groups tend to make about others as stalemates in political negotiations or situations.

The trips outside of their walled world also feature actual human characters who may or may not interact with the Poofsim. Because the Poofsim will find themselves in a variety of areas and situations, a diverse population will be represented to viewers, and they will be exposed to many different kinds of Israelis. In another episode, the Poofsim could find themselves in a restaurant in the Arab Quarter of Jerusalem. Here they would witness a friendly and social environment, as well as learn about Arab culinary traditions that may be mainstream but are not necessarily associated with Arab culture by many Jewish-Israelis. This exposure to real people of other cultures will be important for children who may have frequent exposure in real life. There is a great potential in a show such as this to introduce children to a variety of peoples and cultures within Israel, and to counteract stereotypes that children encounter in their lives.

Conclusions

Currently, there is a discouraging lack of Arab representation in Israeli children's television. Due to prevalent stereotypes in Israeli culture about Arabs, and a general lack of interest in Arab issues that represents the relatively low social status of the Arab community as a whole, this lack of representation in children's television primes Jewish-Israeli children to accept the current societal images and messages about Arabs. The situation, however, is not entirely grim. Some experts remain optimistic. Caspi and Limor conclude that, "…The new mass media map may also help forge multiculturalism, preserving the unifying national ideology while nurturing the ethnic and cultural identities of subgroups and fostering mutual respect among them."[49]

Danny Labin had a similarly optimistic outlook, although he specifically stressed the importance of third-party intervention, such as in the case of *Sippuray Sumsum/Shara'a Simsim*. Dafna Lemish also stressed the importance of outside initiatives or pressures to change the nature of children's programming, especially if there is little influence from within the country on either the Jewish or Arab side. These responses reaffirmed my belief in the importance of conducting analyses of television content and pushing for change.

There is undoubtedly a huge potential for children's television's role in affecting and mediating the stereotype development of children in Israel, especially of those children that are not regularly exposed in real life to interactions with Arabs. Programs such as *Sippuray Sumsum/Shara'a Simsim* demonstrate the potential future of children's television in Israel. Other shows, such as my proposed model of *Gan Choma*, could also play a positive role if developed and aired. I hope Israeli television will move in this direction and that the rising generations can experience a world on television that prepares them to foster stronger inter-ethnic relations between Arabs and Jews, societal equality in Israel, and even peace with their neighbors.

---

[1] Bar-Tal, Daniel."Development of social categories and stereotypes in early childhood: The case of 'the Arab' concept formation, stereotype and attitudes of Jewish children in Israel." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 20 (1996), 341-370.
[2] Shipler, David K. *Arab and Jew: Wounded Spirits in a Promised Land*. New York: Penguin, 1986.
[3] Shipler, 166.
[4] Shipler, 168.
[5] Shipler, 206.
[6] Ibid.

[7] Avraham, Eli. *Behind Media Marginality: Coverage of Social Groups and Places in the Israeli Press*. New York: Lexington Books, 2003.

[8] Avraham, 20.

[9] Avraham, 94.

[10] Avraham, 158.

[11] Avraham, 136.

[12] Avraham, 62.

[13] Bar-Tal, 347.

[14] Bar-Tal, 345.

[15] Bar-Tal, 345.

[16] Bar-Tal, 346.

[17] Bar-Tal, 347.

[18] Bar-Tal, 349.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ovadia, G. "Stereotypes towards Arabs of kindergarten-age children." Tel-Aviv University, Hebrew Unpublished Master's thesis (1993). Cited by Bar- Tal.

[21] Bar-Tal, 350.

[22] Israeli-Diner, G. "Stereotypes of Arabs among nursery-school children." Tel-Aviv University, Hebrew Unpublished Master's thesis (1993). Cited by Bar- Tal.

[23] Bar-Tal, 352.

[24] Bar-Tal, 356.

[25] 1994.

[26] Bar-Tal, 358.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Bar-Tal, 363.

[29] Graves, Sherryl B. "Television and prejudice reduction: When does television as a vicarious experience make a difference?" *Journal of Social Issues* 55(1999): 707-725.

[30] Graves, 712.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Graves ,713.

[34] Dorr, A., Graves, S. B., and Phelps, A. "Television literacy for young children" *Journal of Communication*, 24 (1980): 130-137. As cited by Graves.

[35] Ibid.

[36] http:// http://www.shesh.co.il/programmes/index.asp (Accessed February 2004).

[37] Unless otherwise indicated, all information regarding the *Hop!* Network comes directly from the official website. http://www.hop.co.il (Accessed February 2004).

[38] While in Israel, I was informed that *Bob the Builder* is now more popular than *Teletubbies* among Israeli children. The Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* attributed a status boost for "workingmen" to the popularity of the show. (http://www.Haaretz.com).

[39] Dobrow, J., and Gidney, C. "The good, the bad, and the foreign: The use of dialect in children's animated television." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 557(1998): 105-120.

[40] I worked with an Israeli student translator on this project. As someone familiar with both Arab and Jewish-Israeli cultures, I asked him to go through the online program listings for children's programming on Channels 1, 2, and 32. He searched for characters or situations that would be considered Arab, either explicitly or implicitly. From the information available, he was unable to find representations of Arabs in Hebrew-language programs.

[41] Graves, 709.

[42] Lemish, Dafna. Personal interview. 9 Jan 1994.

[43] Croteau, D., and Hoynes, W. *Media Society*. London: Pine Forge, 2003.

[44] Graves, 717.

[45] Cole, Charlotte, et al. "The educational impact of *Rechov Sumsum/Shara'a Simsim*: A Sesame

Street television series to promote respect and understanding among children living in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza." *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 27(2003): 409-422.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Bar-Lev, Yael. Personal interview. 10 Jan 04.

[48] This format was inspired by Jim Henson's *The Muppet Babies*, which I watched as a child.

[49] Caspi, D., and Limor,Y. *The In/Outsiders: The Media in Israel*. New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1999.