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Systemic Racism of the UNICEF Germany's Ads Depicting Children in Blackface

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## Abstract

In the summer of 2007, UNICEF Germany released four ads containing the use of Blackface. However, neither the German population, nor UNICEF Germany found the use of Blackface insulting or racist when in fact Americans, who have the history of Blackface Theater, were appalled at the display of white German children with mud on their faces, portraying Africans. Through the use of Joe R. Feagin's theory of systemic racism, this paper rhetorically analyzed whether the UNICEF ads should be considered racist outside the American experience of Blackfacing and Blackface Theater. The analysis revealed the UNICEF ads are racist under the systemic racism theory.

### Professional Biographies

Dr. Rachel Anderson Droogsma received a Bachelor of Science in Speech from Northwestern University and a Master of Arts and Ph.D. in Communication and Culture from Howard University. Droogsma is currently an Assistant Professor of Speech Communication at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Droogsma teaches classes such as Intercultural Communication, Advanced Intercultural Communication, and Gender Communication. Her research examines the ways women in culturally marginalized groups resist oppression through communication. This past year, Droogsma received a faculty summer research grant from MSU, and one of her articles was published in the *Journal of Applied Communication Research*. Droogsma also received awards, such as the 2008 Faculty Project of the Year from the President's Commission on the Status of Women, the Women of Courage and Vision award, and she was elected the Second Vice Chair of the Women's Caucus for the National Communication Association for 2008

April Larson is a sophomore at Minnesota State University, Mankato majoring in Speech Communication and Political Science. The research was conducted for a speech for the Minnesota State University, Mankato's Forensics Team. April Larson has been an active member of the Forensics Team for the past two years.

The United Nations Children’s Fund, UNICEF, is a highly regarded organization dedicated to improving the quality of life for children throughout the world. UNICEF Germany sparked controversy in the summer of 2007 when it released four ads promoting its “Schools for Africa” Campaign. The ads are meant to create a sense of unity between German and African children by painting their faces with mud. This ad states, “In Africa, many kids would be glad to worry about school.” However, these ads have come under a great deal of scrutiny mostly by Americans because of the use of Blackfacing and the stereotyping of Africans. These ads recall images of Blackface Theater, when the actors would disguise themselves as African American by smearing mud, shoe polish, or make-up on their faces. A Race Wire Blog user, Yolanda, posted a comment on August 10, 2007 stating, “Why use white kids with dirt on their faces to depict Africans? It’s ridiculous to even try to explain this ad as acceptable” (Yolanda, 2007).

However, when these ads were released in Germany, the Germans did not recognize them as being offensive or racist; Germany does not have a history of Blackface Theater. Rudi Tarneden, a Press Officer for UNICEF Germany, stated on the Black Women in Europe blog July, 19, 2007, the ads have “Absolutely no connotation of black children as ‘dirty children’” (Tarneden, 2007).

This raises the research question: Are the UNICEF ads racist outside the context of the American experience of Blackfacing and Blackface Theater? In order to answer this question, a framework for determining racist communication must be established; second, this framework may then be applied to the UNICEF ads and; third, some implications may be determined based on the analysis.

Racism is not easily defined, although individuals may feel they can recognize when something seems racist, it is often difficult to define what constitutes racism. Joe R. Feagin, a professor of Sociology at the University of Florida, details his extensive research on racism in his book *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, & Future Reparations*. The use of Feagin's framework is justified because he details racism in the "everyday experience" (Feagin, 1995, p. 4).

Feagin concentrates on the idea of Systemic Racism. He clarifies that although many individuals do not mean to be racist, society and the structure guarantees racism will exist, and individual acts of racism will follow. Within the Systemic Racism Theory, two points of Feagin's analysis are crucial in answering the research question: the dialectical relationship between racial groups and the construction of alienating racist relations.

First, systemic racism constructs a dialectical relationship between racial groups. Feagin states, "[systemic racism] fractures human nature by separating those defined and elevated as the 'superior race' against those defined and subordinated as the 'inferior race'" (Feagin, 1995, p. 20). A dialectic is a relationship between two opposing forces where each defines the other. For example, Hegel's Master Slave Dialect describes the tension between slave and master. There is no such thing as a master unless there is also a slave. Where there is systemic racism, races are constructed in such a way that they define one another. Whiteness defines, and is defined by, non-Whiteness.

Second, this dialectical relationship constructs alienating racist relations. According to Feagin, the idea of alienating racist relations occurs when the dominating individual or group removes or limits resources and/or liberties from the oppressed

group, in turn causing unequal circumstances. For example, referring to Blackface Theater in the United States, when a white actor performs in blackface the African-American portrayed is seen as stupid, illiterate, and just acts as comic relief.

Feagin provides us with a basic framework, which can now be applied to the UNICEF Ads. First, beginning with the theory of a dialectic relationship, do the ads exhibit a clear distinction of superiority and inferiority? The texts of the ads include statements contrasting the superiority of German school systems over that of African schools. This ad reads, "I'm waiting for my last day of school, the children in Africa still wait for their first one." The ads attempt to show Germans have a duty to help Africa's children receive an education. Therefore, the ads show a clear superior and inferior relationship as Germans (specifically White Germans) superior over Africans (specifically Black Africans).

Second, moving on to the theory of alienation, do these ads depict a superior group or individual suppressing or limiting an inferior group or individual? The UNICEF ad campaigns are stereotyping all Africans as illiterate and without the resources to attend school. The ads condense African cultures into a single argument that all African children are uneducated. Similar to the idea of Blackface Theater, the ads judge Africans through the lens of the White German cultural ideals. Therefore, the ads depict the Germans limiting the African culture by stereotyping that all Africans are illiterate and should be educated through the distribution of resources controlled by Germans. One could ask, given the cultural diversity of the German population, why do the ads only depict German children as white? Therefore, when returning to the research question: Are the UNICEF ads racist outside the context of the American experience of Blackfacing and



Blackface Theater, the analysis determines that UNICEF's "School's For Africa" Campaign is racist under Feagin's theory of Systemic Racism because they do create messages of superiority and alienation.

Now that Joe R. Feagin's theory of Systemic Racism has determined the German UNICEF ads as racist, two implications of these ads must be acknowledged; the impact of globalization and the invisibility of systemic racism. First, the implication of these ads is that cultures must realize the impact of their communication on a global scale, rather than just a local level. Through our growing technically savvy world, advertisements are seen world wide, rather than just in one nation. As individuals and societies need to be aware of the implications of an ad, such as UNICEF's which influences not only the German perspective, but also that of other societies. This could redefine advertisements and communication on a global level.

Second, this analysis of the UNICEF campaign illustrates the invisibility of systemic racism. Although the motive behind the ads is positive, the campaign is layered with subtle elements of racism. For example, by using only white children, The UNICEF ads imply all Germans are white, and vice versa with regard that all Africans are black. By not acknowledging there are black Germans, and white Africans, or that quality schools exist throughout Africa, the ads assume a superiority of white over Black cultures. In fact, Germany is a multi-cultured society. According to the CIA World Fact Book updated March 20, 2008, eight and a half percent of the German population of about 82 and a half million people are of an ethnic background, including Turkish, Greek, Italian, Polish, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, and even Spanish (World, 2008).

Unintentionally, the UNICEF ads depict the stereotypical white German, accentuating the systemic racism within society.

After looking at both the UNICEF ads and Joe R. Feagin's theory of Systemic Racism, two implications could be drawn after applying his theory to the UNICEF ads. As Noah Sow mentions in his article posted July 17, 2007 on the Black Women for Europe Blog, "This campaign might do just as much harm as it does good. You don't collect money for helping people by humiliating and trivializing them first" (Sow, 2007). Although UNICEF Germany may have had good intentions with their ad, the underlying impacts of these ads have created more controversy than promotion for their campaign.

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