

## **"The Muppets" Among the Cree of Manitoba**

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### *Introduction*

An opportunity to demonstrate the role of culture in shaping people's response to television arose during a study (14) of the impact and meaning of newly introduced television in a Cree community of northern Manitoba, Canada. A survey comparing Cree Preferences to the preferences of Euro-Canadians produced an interesting contrast in reaction to the popular Muppets program (11, p. 101). When asked what programs they like and disliked, one quarter (N=90) of Cree respondents listed The Muppets as a particularly disliked program while not one Euro-Canadian (N=57) did so.<sup>1</sup>

### *Cree Reactions to The Muppets Television Show*

There appeared to be two reasons for the Cree dislike of this program. The first concerns Cree concepts of shamanism and the nature of the shaman's relationship to certain animals (7, p. 43). The second concerns the Cree's tendency to seek out the practical applications to their own situations in television.

Two animals, the frog and the bear, are particularly relevant to curing and sorcery. In the case of the frog, its various bumps and scales are thought to be associated with diseases which can be cured or produced by scraping and properly processing the particular scales and bumps involved. Furthermore, some Cree believe that to dream of a frog is a bad omen, which may entail blood sacrifice if the frog's enticement to power is accepted. Cree tell stories about frogs as power figures, and they are very wary of a live frog (9, p. 41). Some will not go near one, fearing it as a potential sorcery messenger. Evidence that negative conceptions of frogs are carried over to Kermit, the puppet frog who hosts the Muppets show, is contained in several statements made by Cree who were interviewed. The following, by a Cree woman, is typical: "Frog is not the most beautiful host," she said, "the show is ridiculous."

Bears are believed to be human like, very powerful spiritually, and very dangerous. They must be respectfully treated or bad luck may follow. It is believed that a strong shaman may transform himself into a bear to gain revenge or produce other effects (see 12). There were no statements which directly connected Cree conceptions of bears to negative perceptions of The Muppets. However, it is not improbable that the portrayal of Fozzie, a puppet bear on the show, as an impotent, timid, misfit would be construed as a disrespectful insult.

With reference to the second points (see 4, 5, 9 and 13) it was determined that Cree seek concrete and practical references in tele-

vision viewing. They try to apply practically what they see on television to their personal problems, seeking signs and revelations from programs just as they would from more traditional stories and legends (see 8 and 6, p. 156). They do not separate entertainment and reality as Euro-Canadians do (see 10, p. 117).

This need to apply what is seen on television has produced a desire for relevance in programming and a tendency to resist sheer fantasy.<sup>2</sup> This may explain why some Cree stated that *The Muppets* show is too unreal and irrelevant. Unfamiliarity with sheer fantasy may also explain one man's fear that "people might act to each other like puppets rather than real people."

### *Video Tape Muppets Experiment*

To further test these findings, the authors devised a video tape experiment to determine the role of tradition in Cree interpretations of *The Muppets*. An episode of *The Muppets* show was videotaped and shown to households in a northern Manitoba Cree community and in a rural Manitoba Euro-Canadian community. The program had been available for viewing in the Cree community for three years and in the Euro-Canadian community for about six years. After viewing, a questionnaire was administered in which subjects were asked to perform a variety of tasks including completing unfinished sentences, selecting from a list of adjectives those that they felt pertained to Kermit, Fozzie, and Miss Piggy (the Muppet pig), and sorting two picture sets (one containing a frog, pig and bear and the other containing Kermit, Miss Piggy and Fozzie) into the categories of hero, victim and villain.

The results with respect to adjective selection showed that Cree chose the adjective "tricky" to describe Kermit twice as often as the rural Euro-Canadian sample. Among the Cree, 60% (=34) chose this adjective while among the Euro-Canadian sample only 30% (N=37) did so. In addition, while 45% (N=38) of the Cree chose "power" adjectives (e.g., dangerous, bad, powerful) to describe Fozzie, only 24% (N=40) of the Euro-Canadian sample did so. With respect to the sorting of pictures, 80% (N=40) of the Cree applied the same categories to Muppet characters as were applied to their real animal counterparts. Only 60% (N=40) of the Euro-Canadian sample did so ( $t=1.7$ ,  $p=.05$ ).

These results supported the ethnographic findings. Traditions of frogs as devilish and tricky were probably responsible for the differences that were seen in responses to adjective selection in which Cree more often perceived Kermit as a trickster. Traditions of bears as powerful and fearful were probably responsible for Cree responses to adjective selection in which Fozzie was more often described with "power" adjectives. And traditions of particularism and



concreteness, which would create a reluctance for Cree to separate entertainment from reality, were probably a factor in the Cree's greater consistency in applying conceptions of real animals to Muppet counterparts.

Particularistic emphases were probably also behind Cree reactions to the sentence completion item "Puppets are alive because . . .?" While 54% of the Cree denied this concept and replied that "They are not alive!", only 7% of Euro-Canadians did so, preferring instead to explain the behind-the-scenes manipulations that must have been used to make the puppets move and talk. Because of their greater particular emphasis the Cree probably reacted more negatively to the fantastic, unbelievable nature of the show and were anxious to make note of their contempt for puppets acting as if they were alive.

### *Conclusions*

Alternative interpretations of the questionnaire results are possible. It could be argued that the data reflect greater Cree unfamiliarity with the personality of Muppet characters which causes them to be more likely to apply prior conceptions of animal prototypes when describing The Muppets. It could also be argued that Cree and Euro-Canadian traditions about frogs and bears are really not that much different but that the Cree have a greater tendency to apply those traditions to Muppet characters because of their more intensive particularistic emphases and consequent desires to combine entertainment and reality. It would seem, however, that the most plausible explanation is that all three factors are at work (i.e., greater unfamiliarity among Cree with The Muppets and with television in general, greater concrete psychological orientations among Cree, and Cree traditions of frogs and bears which particularly emphasize the frog's trickery and the bear's power).

In any case, the results confirm the position that the effective use of television in developing areas requires the realization that television's impact varies by cultural tradition and that it must be sensitively adjusted to people's beliefs and values. The impracticality of Western models of television for non-Western peoples has often been stated but not as often objectively demonstrated. Perhaps this demonstration, when considered in light of the international importance of The Muppets through their close association with Sesame Street, will stimulate the development of new models and new sensitivities.

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Similar negative reaction to The Muppets may be noted among Alaskan Eskimo (1) and among the Plains Cree (2).
- <sup>2</sup> This has been found to be true of other non-Western groups (see 3, p. 22 and 10, p. 117).

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