

# **Representation Matters**

**Faisa Qasim and active members of  
the Mentoring for Future project**

**R**epresentation means being seen. It means that many kinds of people are widely seen in society and its different strands. However, there are several degrees of representation, and just being seen is not enough. Voices of people from different backgrounds, different ethnicities, and different minorities must be heard. Minorities should be allowed to be active, independent agents. They must be able to see people like themselves in media and culture as active creators.

When talking about representation and its meaning, we must listen to the minorities themselves to avoid the pitfalls of defining things from a position of power (Rinne & Wass, 2017). The more we see true diversity in media, culture, and society, the more we give a platform to people to be who they are. People have the right to want and hope for different things, to build themselves a fuller identity in their own terms. Representation must be total, so we not only see minorities in pictures – but also as creators and content producers (Rask, 2021).

### **As Agents in a Society**

Studies provide humanity with new information that enables us to shift our perspectives. This trickles down directly to our culture, our ways of working, and our attitudes. In studies on minorities, the diversity of researchers matters, since although there are standards of objectivity, we are all human and thus can be unconsciously biased. It would also be important to compile statistics based on ethnicity in Finland. Now an entire group of people is missing from the data as ethnicity is not a factor in statistics. People who are born in Finland and speak Finnish as their first language, but whose parents are immigrants and who are visibly part of a minority, are seen only as Finnish in statistics, regardless of their ethnic background. According to Elone (2020), due to the lack of ethnicity statistics, it is impossible to study, for example, what is the visibility of ethnic groups in Finnish me-

dia compared to their actual sizes. (Elone, 2020 ja Ruskeat Tytöt, 2022).

We are defined by our own experiences of society, and we must actively steer clear of the prejudices and attitudes formed by them. For example, the view of an equal society as experienced by a white Western person is skewed, since they have not had to experience the structural racism of the societal system. Thus, it is important that minorities who suffer from structural racism get a chance to do all the things the ‘majority’ can do. It is important to highlight who is telling what about whom, so that the imagery, statistics, and data are not distorted by an outsider’s way of looking and get trampled under the dominating culture – as unfortunately has been the case throughout history. (Rinne & Wass, 2017 ja Elone, 2020)

### **A Voice of One’s Own**

It is important that, for example, representatives of immigrant minorities get to represent themselves and speak about their issues. Who else could know about their experience? On the other hand, representatives of minorities should also have the freedom to be presented not just as part of a minority. People are many things, and identity is not limited to one characteristic. One person cannot represent an entire minority, as there is a lot of difference and differing thoughts within a minority group. The key to true representation does not lie in homogenous presentation. Here the content and the creators of culture become crucial. (Rask, 2021)

As a person from an ethnic minority sees others like themselves in cultural products as diverse and differing agents, their ideas of their own possibilities in life are automatically widened (Qasim, 2022).

It does more harm than good to insist that minorities only talk about the same issues and take a stance on them, rather than giving them the chance to just be people with their different characteristics and interests. This is often combined with the free educational work that

the members of minorities are often forced to do for the benefit of the majority. Those born with privileges should be prepared to find out for themselves, and when asking for education from minorities, they should be compensated for their time, knowledge, and the minority stress caused by the education.

### **Diversity of Representation**

In early 2022, Faisa Qasim and Salaado Qasim organised a photography exhibition *Suuria unelmia – tarinoita suomalaisista* (Dreaming Big – Stories of Finns). The exhibition gave the spotlight to people from Finnish minorities who have become established in positions in the Finnish society. It included, for example, politicians, an actor, an author, a reporter, an athlete, and a psychotherapist. In reviews of the exhibition, the significance of representation was highlighted, particularly the diversity of representation. ‘The stories of the exhibition gave light to the significance of diverse and positive representation and broadened the horizons of what Finnishness is. Many stories showed the power of setting an example,’ organiser Salaado Qasim said of the exhibition.

Also, the stories that accompanied the photographs highlighted the importance of examples in young people’s lives. When you see people like you doing different things, the world becomes more open and the spectrum of options wider in their lives.

Our society is largely portraying only one kind of humanity as the role model in Western society. This portrayal is very white and narrow, and it can be confining and even hazardous. Of course, it works for some people, as they can see themselves in this traditional portrayal. What is toxic about it is the position of power in the imagery. This means that many, for example people with immigrant backgrounds, do not fit this mould and suffer under its yoke, or instead live trying to pursue consciously or unconsciously. The narrowness of the imagery causes, at its worst, direct threat. When people do not see enough diversity in media and cultur-

al imagery, they do not understand it when they come across it. This leads to fear and even violence towards different minority groups. (Syys-  
taival, 2020)

### **Identification Gives Strength to Dream Big**

An excellent example of the diversity of representation is the children’s book *Anisa tahtoo kierrättää* (Anisa Wants to Recycle, 2022) by Salaado Qasim. The focus of the book is not the usual racism connected with ethnic minorities or the promotion of multiculturalism that is often demanded of them. In the book, Anisa gets to just be Anisa – her background and potential minority stress are not highlighted as themes. Instead, the protagonist has an interest in recycling, and that is what the story is about. In its illustrations, brown children and families are presented naturally. As just people.

The book both shows an important representation to brown children, as well as shows different people doing different things for all children to see, which is valuable. This is a way to undo the supremacy of whiteness in our society. It is crucial for the improvement of our society that the dominant group does not pigeon-hole minorities in just certain roles, since that plays a part in not letting these groups break free of negative representation.

Another important book example on widening representation is a work based on the *Suuria unelmia* exhibition, *Suuria unelmia – tarinoita suomalaisista, jotka muuttivat maailmaa* (Stories of Finns Who Changed the World), written by Salaado Qasim, Faisa Qasim, and Roosa Oksanen. The book drives home the point of needing diversity in representation: ‘There are endless ways to follow your own path, and each story is equally valuable. Therefore, each person needs support in finding their dreams and making them come true – as well as inspiring role models who show that anything is possible,’ the introduction of the book states.

Just the fact that the book’s title includes the word ‘Finns’ is crucial to representation. In the

book, influencers are sharing their different stories and life paths with the reader – and they are all Finns. This kind of experience of identification is invaluable to people who have not previously had access to a similar level of representation in the current cultural atmosphere.

Shadia Rask (2021) writes in her essay, *Representaatiolla on merkitystä – näillä keinoilla lisää työyhteisösi moninaisuutta* (Representation matters – Here’s how you can enhance the diversity in your work community): ‘Representation has to do with identification and being seen. Particularly in childhood and youth, we are constructing our identities and modeling ourselves after people who we think are like us. It is tremendously harmful if there are no

role models or the people to identify with are found only in narrow and stereotypical roles’ (Rask 2021). The photography exhibition aimed at young people in the capital region mentioned previously addresses this need. People cannot become what they have not been able to see (Syystaival, 2020).

Our society is in a state of flux, and outdated imagery and attitudes must be broken to enhance the wellbeing of people and a sense of belonging. We are not alike, and we are not here alone. Mutual respect and understanding, as well as identifying discriminatory historical constructs and demanding their change, are ways to push society towards a more equal future. ●

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## Wheel of power and Privilege

Wheel of power and privilege (the next page) is derived from several sources.

<https://ccrweb.ca/en/anti-oppression>

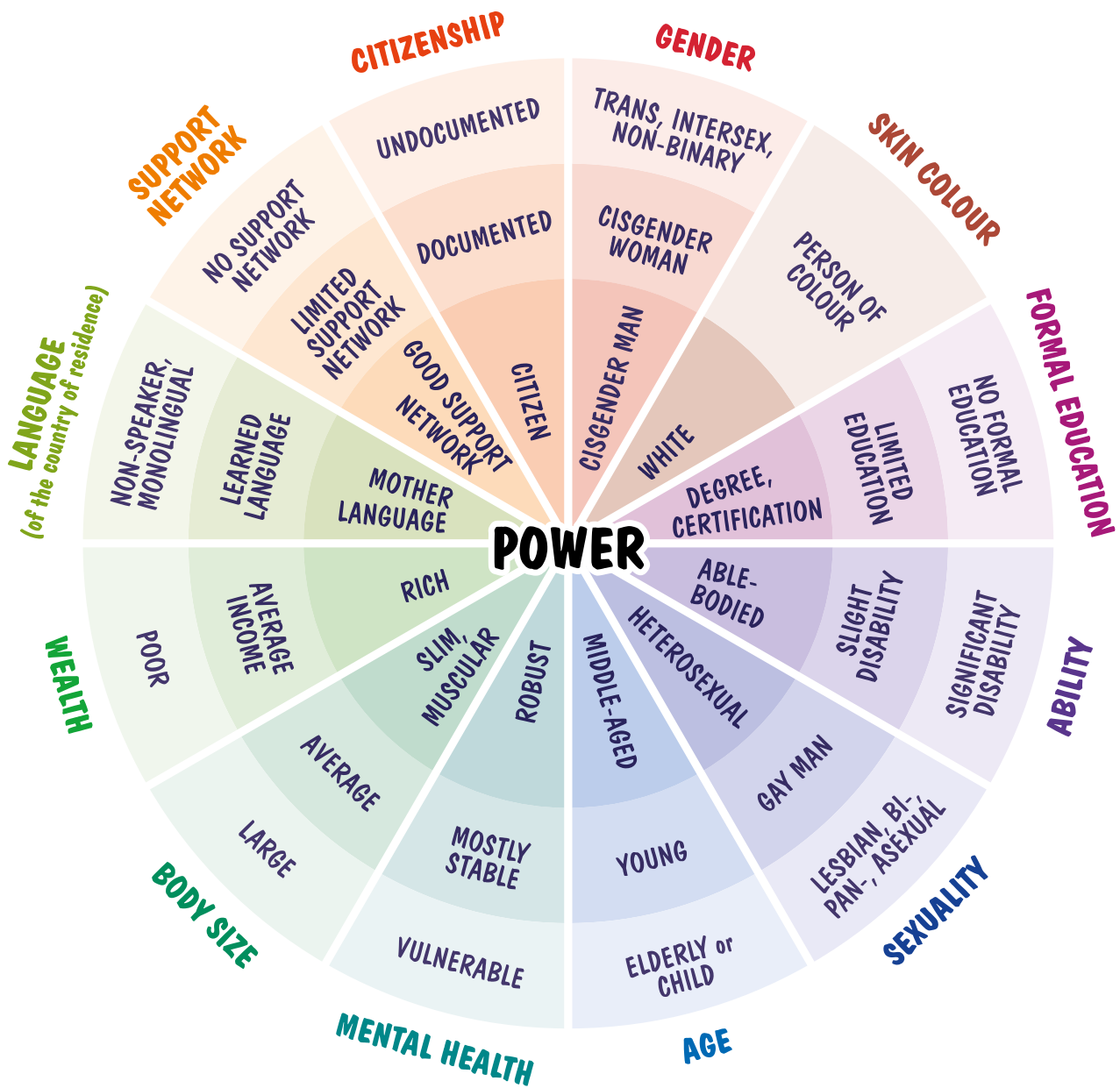
[https://www.thisshowyoucan.com/post/\\_/wheel\\_of\\_power\\_and\\_privilege](https://www.thisshowyoucan.com/post/_/wheel_of_power_and_privilege)

<https://julkaisut.haaga-helia.fi/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2021/05/etuoikeuskeha-tekstiin-1024x647.jpg>

# Exercises

## Exercise 1

Look up the concept of the wheel of power and privilege below. Notice that the wheel of power and privilege does not illustrate the desired situation but is a continuously changing illustration of the unequal distribution of individual power and prosperity in different situations. Think about where you would fit on the different categories of the wheel of power and privilege. Where do the members of your group fit? How might this affect your group and how it is promoting equality? What are your special strengths, and how could you improve them? Could your work aim at breaking the inequality illustrated in the wheel of power and privilege?



## **Exercise 2**

Think and try to remember if you've ever encountered ways of performing in art or cultural activities that made you confused or want to resist or question what you just saw/experienced? For example, witnessing an activity or a role the values of which you did not share. Discuss and share your experiences.

### **Group exercise**

Try this exercise on the experience of being seen with your group. Introduce yourselves in the manners described below. Do people notice you if you don't say anything or don't make eye contact? What does it feel like being ignored? You can vary the exercise endlessly. Discuss the emotions the exercise made you feel.

- The group watches as you calmly walk in front of them, look at them for a while, tell them your name, and then calmly leave.
- The group watches as you walk in front of them, look at them silently for a while, and then leave.
- The group watches as you walk in front of them, but you don't make eye contact. What if you come to introduce yourself but the group leaves instead, or starts yelling their own names?

### **Advanced exercise**

The principles of a safer space are meant to enable open and respectful actions and discussions that promote equality. The principles of a safer space are often written down, but they can just as well be illustrated creatively, for example, through the means of art. The important thing is that all the participants are aware of the principles and are committed to follow them. Does your group or organisation have principles of a safer space? If not, come up with ones together with everyone. If you already have guidelines for a safer space, go through them together and see if they require updating, and discuss how the guidelines are put into action now. The instructor makes sure the conversation does not become personal, but the guideline is created and discussed with focus on the subject matter.