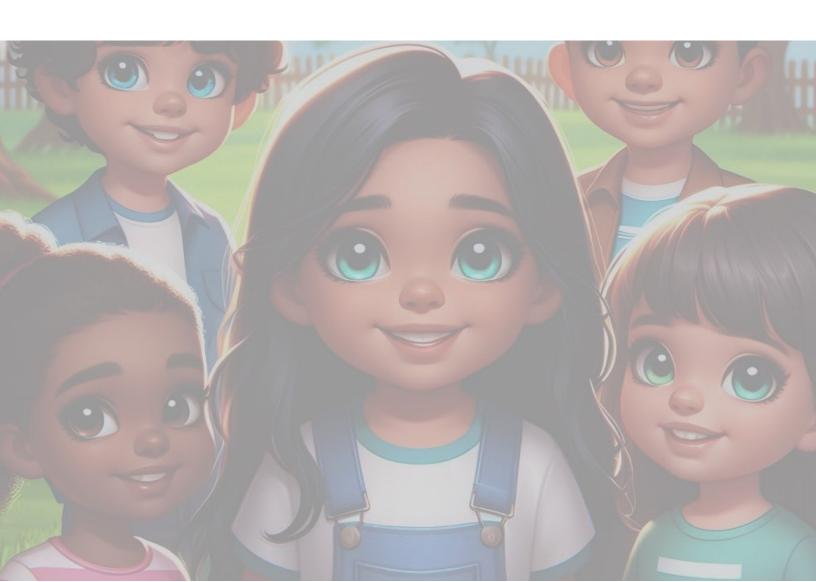# EMBRACING DIVERSITY IN AUDIO DESCRIPTION: A PARADIGM SHIFT FOR INCLUSIVITY

**BY DICAPTA'S AUDIO DESCRIPTION TEAM
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ABSTRACT

This white paper explores the evolving paradigm in audio description, emphasizing including racial and ethnic characteristics when describing individuals/people in media. It aims to provide a comprehensive guide on best practices, highlighting the importance of representation and empathy, and challenging stereotypes through thoughtful and detailed audio descriptions.

INTRODUCTION

The art of Audio Description is based on the textual or verbal representation of visual elements in images, videos, movies, dances, plays, and so on (media, for this paper). This representation allows individuals who can't access or decode visual information to enjoy, comprehend, and actively discuss any media experience. Serving primarily the needs of individuals who are blind, this evolving art has enriched the media experience for children and adults with autism, learning disabilities, as well as for individuals tailoring their film and TV scripting skills or for those learning a different language.

In multiple fields, from education to entertainment, audio description has traditionally skirted around explicitly mentioning race and ethnicity. However, society's increasing diversity awareness and acceptance calls for a more inclusive approach that emphasizes visibility and representation in media. This document examines the shift towards acknowledging racial and ethnic identities in audio descriptions, underpinning its necessity in creating a diverse and inclusive media landscape.

BACKGROUND AND TRADITIONAL PRACTICES

Historically, audio description guidelines recommended avoiding mentioning race or ethnicity unless pivotal to the plot or context. This practice stemmed from a desire to promote inclusivity by not highlighting differences. However, this approach often led to underrepresentation and a need for more visibility for diverse groups.

Describing characters is always a challenge for audio-describers. The racial and ethnic identity of a person is a social construction, so it becomes a highly subjective aspect, and its definition and categorization may vary according to the cultural and geographical context. For this reason, these characteristics have been traditionally omitted in audio descriptions.

DISTINGUISHING RACE AND ETHNICITY

Understanding the distinction between race and ethnicity is critical in audio descriptions. Race refers to physical attributes such as skin color, facial features, and hair texture and is often associated with biological factors. On the other hand, ethnicity is a more complex and multifaceted concept, encompassing cultural, linguistic, and communal affinities that bind individuals into distinct groups.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary offers the following summary about the use of both words: the term *race* is understood today as primarily a sociological designation that identifies a group sharing some outward physical characteristics and some commonalities of culture and history, while *ethnicity* is a word for something you acquire based on where your family is from and the group which you share cultural, traditional, and familial bonds and experiences with. The end result: people may have racial similarity but ethnic dissimilarity.

Aligned with that, it is important to emphasize that when describing, race may be detailed by painting with words physical attributes, but ethnicity belongs to a cultural interpretation made by whoever is describing, unintentionally adding their cultural identity to the mix.

RACE IN THE TRADITIONAL GUIDELINES FOR AUDIO DESCRIPTION

Until recently, guidelines validated by the audio description industry recommended not including racial or ethnicity descriptions, except for specific exceptions. Regarding this subject, the [Post Production Described Best Practices](#) by AMI in Canada states, "An identification of characters by race, ethnic origin or disability is not required unless there is relevancy to plot, motivation or background, or if meaningful information is being communicated visually and would be otherwise unavailable"; similarly, Dicapta's AD guidelines used to state, "Only when the context and subject matter warrant it, it is worthwhile to clarify or mention race; to do so, use terms such as black race, white race, or Asian features."

Even though the ideal inclusive scenario would be, precisely, not to talk, and discuss race differences, today, as part of an effort to reach that goal, highlighting, remarking, and concisely mentioning race differences when describing is essential for the comprehension of the context, and encouraging diversity awareness, as well as for promoting inclusion and equality.

THE PARADIGM SHIFT: IMPORTANCE OF INCLUDING RACE AND ETHNICITY

A shift in perspective has emerged, recognizing that omitting racial and ethnic descriptions can inadvertently contribute to exclusion. By incorporating these elements, audio descriptions can foster diversity, promote empathy, and challenge stereotypes while building a new society. This section delves into the reasons behind this paradigm shift, especially applied to children's media.

Image Description:
Image on the left. A young girl with light brown skin and long, dark, curly hair sits at a desk, reading a large book. She wears a bright yellow dress adorned with a sunflower pattern. Her eyes sparkle. The room is warmly illuminated, featuring a globe, a telescope, and posters in the background.
Image on the right. A boy with dark brown skin and short, tightly coiled hair operates a toy car outside. He sports a red hoodie paired with blue jeans. He smiles. In the background are other children. A playground is in the distance.

Media can significantly influence children's perceptions and attitudes, including their views on race, gender, culture, and social norms. By ensuring that children's media is inclusive and diverse, we can encourage the development of a more accepting and understanding society. It helps in normalizing diversity and inclusivity as part of everyday life.

Why is this discussion important?
Because what is not described does not exist for the viewer

- **Representation of diversity**

Children need to see their own racial and ethnic diversity reflected in the media so they can feel represented and valued. By showing characters from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, children can identify with the characters and feel part of the story. This promotes a sense of inclusion and belonging. A good example of reactions from kids can be found following this link: [Black Kids' Heartwarming Reactions to 'The Little Mermaid'.](#)

- **Promoting empathy and acceptance**

Being exposed to racial diversity from an early age may help children develop empathy and understanding for people who are equal but different from them. By seeing and learning about different cultures and races, children can develop a natural view and positive attitude toward diversity and learn to accept and respect others.

- **Challenging stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination**

Common stereotypes and prejudices are challenged by showing characters of different races realistically and positively. Stereotypes can limit children's perspectives and perpetuate prejudice and discrimination. Follow the link to see [the effects of racism on children during a Doll test.](#)

"By age eight, racial attitudes are well developed and tend to stay the same unless a child has significant experiences and adult guidance that directly contradict the prevailing social attitudes"
(Hindley & Edwards, 2017)

Including and showing diversity in audiovisual content accurately and authentically encourages an inclusive perspective, which helps break down negative stereotypes.

CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF RACIAL DIVERSITY
The way that children perceive racial diversity can be different depending on their level of understanding, previous experiences, and the information provided to them. This explains why audio description is such an important source of educational information for blind children, as it helps to provide them with the same experience as sighted children.

Although blind children cannot see physical differences in people's race, **they can develop an understanding and appreciation of racial diversity through other means**, such as verbal descriptions, language, accents, and social interactions.

● **Verbal descriptions**
Children, including those who are blind, can learn about racial diversity through detailed verbal descriptions of people's physical characteristics. They can hear about variations in skin tone, hair color, texture, face shape, and other distinguishing features commonly used to describe race.

● **Language and accents**
Children, including those who are blind, may also notice differences in the sounds and accents of people's voices, which may be associated with a particular race or ethnicity. These elements can provide clues to cultural and ethnic diversity in their environment.

- **Social interaction**

Children, including those who are blind, interact with different people in their environment, such as family members, friends, classmates, and community members. Through these interactions, they can learn about racial diversity through the experiences, perspectives, and cultural backgrounds of the people with whom they interact.
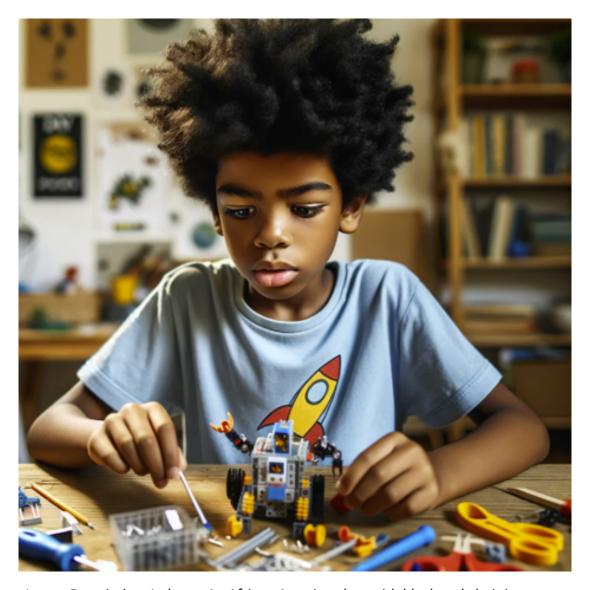

Image Description: Indoors. An African American boy with black curly hair is assembling a robot from a science kit. He is wearing a light blue t-shirt with a cartoon rocket ship design. The boy is seated at a wooden table. He has a focused expression and looks at the robot pieces on the table while he lifts a white and long piece from the table. The wall behind him is adorned with posters and a bookshelf with books.

It is important to notice that a child's experience interpreting racial diversity can be unique and personal. Each child has strengths, interests, and ways of perceiving and understanding the world. Promoting an inclusive environment where all identities and cultures are celebrated and valued is critical to supporting understanding and respect for racial diversity.

RECOMMENDED PROCEDURE WHEN AUDIO DESCRIBING FOR THE MEDIA INDUSTRY

1. **Educate and introduce content creators to the basics of AD and the needs of children with visual disabilities from the inception of the series/educational content.**

The video "Join the Audio Description Movement - The Directors Have the Floor" by Dicapta can help introduce the concept of AD among content creators. Click on the name of the video to access it. You can also create a basic resource kit to share with them or schedule an awareness workshop with experts in the field.

2. **Request character descriptions from content creators.**

This is an editorial decision, and content creators should provide the Audio Description team with the specific details they wish to highlight for the audience. Dicapta has created a form for that purpose. Follow the link to review the character's visual details to consider when describing, and feel free to use it as a guide.

3. **Consult with experts or represented community members to ensure accurate description.**

Consulting with people with first-hand knowledge or experience related to race and ethnicity will improve the final product. Their input can provide valuable information and help avoid potential stereotypes or bias. See references for some examples.

4. **Assess the significance of each character within the specific context to determine which aspects should be described and which should not.**

Evaluating how the character's physical characteristics contribute to their identity and the story is critical. This will help guide the decision-making process on what aspects to emphasize in the Audio Description.

5. **Collaboration between the content creators and the AD team will ensure the accurate portrayal of race and ethnicity in the audiovisual content.**

Solicit feedback and review of the Audio Description script from the content creator to facilitate this process.

6. **Testing the material with the target audience to make necessary changes or adjustments. Seek feedback and engage in dialogue with consumers. For example, blind children, their families, and the broader blind community.**

It is important to work together on this last step, which will provide additional feedback on race and ethnicity and the quality of the Audio Description produced. Dicapta actively involves blind children, their families, and representatives of the blind community in developing and improving audio description. Their perspectives have been invaluable for the production team and will be invaluable to the content creator to ensure that the media content is inclusive and meets their needs.

CONCLUSIONS

The journey towards inclusion has led us through changing norms and emerging best practices. In this white paper, we've explored the vital paradigm shift redefining how we approach the portrayal of race and ethnicity in audio description —a shift from omission to inclusion, from invisibility to visibility.

The importance of this shift cannot be overstated. By consciously incorporating racial and ethnic diversity in our audio description field, we construct a new society by empowering children to perceive and appreciate a spectrum of human experiences. This enriches their understanding and fosters a more inclusive worldview from the earliest stages of development. It is a proactive step towards building a society that values every individual and celebrates diversity as a collective strength.

The recommended practices outlined in this paper serve as a blueprint for content creators and audio describers. From balanced representation to cultural sensitivity, these guidelines ensure that audio descriptions are accurate, respectful and authentic.

Finally, our commitment to ongoing collaboration with the blind community, experts, and content creators ensures that audio description remains a dynamic tool that evolves with our social fabric and continues to serve as an agent of change.

As we look to the future, we aspire to cultivate a media environment that mirrors a society where diversity is not merely included but embraced. A society where every child can navigate the world with confidence and a sense of belonging. We hope this white paper will serve as a stepping stone toward that inclusive and vibrant tomorrow.

Dicapta's Audio Description Team
María-Victoria Díaz, PhD, Andrea Giménez, Sergio Carrasquilla, and Olga L. Collazos.

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ORGANIZATIONS

- *Stanford[1] Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity - https://ccsre.stanford.edu/*

- *Perception Institute - https://perception.org/*

- *OpenStax - Rice University - https://openstax.org/books/introduction-sociology-3e/pages/11-1-racial-ethnic-and-minority-groups*

- *American Psychological Association - https://www.apa.org/topics/racism-bias-discrimination*

- *Pew Research Center - https://www.pewresearch.org/topic/race-ethnicity/*

VIDEOS OF INTEREST

- *Doll test - The effects of racism on children - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRZPw-9sJtQ*

- *These Twins Show That Race Is A Social Construct | National Geographic - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FS4DGri-NBo*

- *4- to 6-Year-Olds Review Dolls Of Different Skin Colors | Regardless Of Race - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q8_EqAWFs4k*

- *Dr Kenneth Clark | The Doll Test and Desegregation (1988) - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-nH8LE4zAU*