

Expert Talk: Intercultural Use of the Gefühlsmonster Cards

**“In Rwanda you will be asked if you are hungry,
when you yawn”**

To kick off our Summer Academy on July 15th, 2022 we had the first expert’s conversation in our new format. Antje Vorndran (Gefühlsmonster GmbH) spoke with Alina Juch, a curative educator (*Heilpädagogin*), about the use of the Gefühlsmonster® Cards¹ during her travels in East Africa, and the experiences she had with them. The different ways of dealing with emotions, some very different interpretations of the cards, and a surprising translation for feelings, in East Africa – compared to those in Germany – the attentive listeners were treated to some compelling facts on this Zoom evening.

The Gefühlsmonsters transform and illustrate feelings and thus help to become aware of them and to verbalize them. *“The eyes begin to sparkle”*, reports Alina Juch about her experience in her work with children and youth with autism, and with their parents, using a relationship-oriented approach. Born and raised in Berlin, she spent a year in Rwanda ten years ago

and has spent the last seven months travelling in East African countries such as Rwanda, Kenya, and Tanzania.

During her travels she has encouraged children and adults to explore and work with their feelings using the Gefühlsmonster® cards. Unlike living in industrialized countries, such as Germany, many people in the developing countries she visited are still more concerned with meeting their basic needs in everyday life. If the main focus is on how to raise money for food, shelter and schooling, feelings and emotional work often have a lesser priority.

Whether in Germany, Rwanda or Kenya, children approach the Gefühlsmonster® cards with an open mind and are more curious and playful than adults. The latter often have reservations at first and have to establish a connection with the Gefühlsmonsters.

One of the children’s favourite cards across many cultures is number three.

¹ Gefühlsmonster® Cards depict characters expressing different emotions, which can be used in many different settings where emotions need to be conveyed and understood.



Fig. 1: Gefühlsmonster® card 3

Being cool and self-confident simply feels good.

Alina Juch has observed that in general the cards stand on their own. The images work faster and clearer than words, and they make sense across generations and cultures.

Especially when there is no common language other levels of communication the cards become important, like physical expression or acting out what is seen on the card. Simple keywords, such as *“Which (which card)”*, *“How (how are you)”*, *“What (what is the card called)”*, *“Where (where in your body)”*, should be established together. This is worthwhile and enables an even more differentiated use of the cards.

Alina Juch: *“It doesn’t need many words.”*

The studied curative educator uses other terms for the cards in Rwanda and in other East African countries, since *“monsters there have negative connotations, often connected to supernatural powers”*. She calls them *“little guys”*, *“characters”*, or *“emotion cards”*.

While working in Africa she noticed that our monsters don’t have ears, the focus is on the eyes. In our country eye contact is very important, in Rwanda it is more the listening; *“Kumva”* is Kinyarwanda and means not only *“listening”*, but also *“feeling”* and *“tasting”*. Against this background, cards are often interpreted quite differently than in some other countries..

For example, card number 16 was more often perceived positively and associated with self-confidence: *“I am strong, here we go!”* and *“It’s good the way it is.”*



Fig. 2: Gefühlsmonster® card 16

At the same time she observed that in East African countries, missteps and (socially) inappropriate behaviour are punished more severely from a young age on. The reasons for the behaviour are less important than in Germany.

Thus, few strategies are learned for dealing with one’s own feelings, especially challenging ones, when an adult caregiver’s understanding and support for coping with these feelings would be needed. This means that seemingly minor issues often escalate into disputes more quickly, even for adults.

Further cultural differences became visible, here with card number 1.

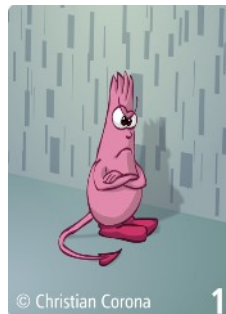


Fig. 3: Gefühlsmonster® card 1

In Germany, the character is seen as someone who is angry and not open to listening to the words of their counterpart. In Rwanda, on the other hand, it can mean, *“I am listening to you intently, my attention is with you.”*

The different interpretation of card number 9 is also interesting:



Fig. 4: Gefühlsmonster® card 9

In East Africa yawning is interpreted as being hungry.

The findings of the 28-year-old Alina Juch: The cards are well accepted when the person who uses them has a suitable attitude. It requires being familiar with the cards, as well as the belief that they can be instantly helpful.

The second important realization in Alina Juch’s work, in Germany as well as in East Africa, taught us that a cultural exchange always starts with ourselves. It is about becoming aware of things and views that we have previously regarded as *“normal”* and *“self-evident”*. We have not been open to different views and learning methods. Feelings want to tell us something, want to be seen and enter into a relationship with us. The Gefühlsmonster® cards, which are not subject to any given interpretation, but are open to individual definition, can help with this.



Fig. 5: Gefühlsmonster® cards 15 & 18

Alina Juch herself has two personal favourite cards. For her, number 15 means gratitude, peace, happiness, and joy, while number 18 stands for keenness and a fresh start.

Alina Juch’s conclusion after the one-hour talk:

„Whether in East Africa or Germany, using the Gefühlsmonster® Cards is worth it.“

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