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**A Tale as Old as Time –**

**An analysis of negative stereotypes in Disney Princess Movies**

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**Abstract**

The Disney Corporation has been entertaining families with animated films since the 1930s. Disney princesses have gained notoriety over the years and even received their own line of products in the 1990s. Disney princess movies and related products have brought in billions of dollars through sales. Disney is a household name, and children all around the world are familiar with the movies. Through content analysis, this study examined the ways in which negative stereotypes are reinforced in Disney princess movies and the effects those stereotypes have on young, impressionable minds.

**Introduction**

This study focused on the top ten grossing Disney princess movies of all time. These included: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *Mulan* (1998), *Enchanted* (2007), *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), and *Tangled* (2010). Each movie was analyzed for its content regarding gender, race, and social class. The princess in each movie was also studied for characteristics and attributes indicating how a "normal" girl looks and behaves. A timeline was implemented to monitor the progress made in depictions of characters over time. The results were then compared with previous research on the topic.

This research is important because children view these stereotypical roles as the right and only way to behave. As researchers England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek (2011) discussed, these commonly portrayed characteristics suggest that "some gendered characteristics are not permissible for the prince or princess to display" (p. 563). So, a prince will not show a loss of power or outcry of emotion, and a princess is unlikely to be seen as a hero or be put into a position of power. If young children see these characters as the norm, their reality becomes skewed. The same applies to the race and social classes depicted in the films. If children don't look or live like those they see on the screen, they often see something wrong with themselves and develop self-esteem issues.

**Literature Review**

The literature reviewed for this project provided insight into the current issues surrounding Disney films and how these movies can contribute to current social problems such as gender and racial stereotypes. One article I reviewed by England et al. (2011) focused on gender stereotypes in Disney princess films. Their results revealed three main themes. First, definite characteristics of female and male characters were portrayed. They noted that "The least commonly portrayed characteristics for the princesses all are traditionally masculine…"(p. 560). Secondly, they found that male characteristics such as "rescues" were most often completed by male characters. And finally, they tested their hypothesis and found some gradual progression toward a more egalitarian princess (p. 561). I found similar results but also found as they did that the progression is not keeping up with current society.

An important piece of literature covering the topic of race in Disney movies authored by Dorothy Hurley  (2005) was entitled "*Seeing White: Children of Color and The Disney Fairy Tale Princess.*" She argued that because of the white domination seen in Disney movies, children of color do not find characters to whom they can relate. When characters of color are present, they are misrepresented or shown strictly as "bad." Hurley pointed out that these films "reveal indisputable evidence of white privileging and binary color symbolism that associates white with goodness and black with evil" (p. 224). Because Hurley believed that children need to be able to "see" themselves within the movies in order to create a positive self-image (p. 221), films that do not portray race or portray it in a stigmatized manner can be harmful to child development. The messages to the white children can produce hegemonic attitudes, and the messages to children of color can produce attitudes of despair and repression.

Another article I found very relatable to my topic was "A Taste of Louisiana: Mainstreaming Blackness Through Food in *The Princess and the Frog*" by Fabio Parasecoli (2010). *The Princess and the Frog* was very influential as it was the first time an African-American character was cast as the princess. Although this would appear to be a positive event, Parasecoli discussed how the movie was actually degrading to African Americans and enforced negative stereotypes often held about their race. Parasecoli argued that the movie creates a "fantasy melting pot" and the princess' "representation as food provider, manual worker, as well as nurturer are all familiar roles for black women in American culture" (p. 466).

In Disney's defense, Joel Best and Kathleen Lowney (2009) questioned why Disney was subject to attacks regarding movie content. What they found was that because of Disney's name and reputation, he was often the subject of attacks simply for the sake of those attacking to gain attention. Because Disney was known for being "good" and "wholesome," it was noted that "Disney stands accused of hypocrisy, bad-faith, and other problematic shortcomings" (p. 444). Although these findings may be true, popularity also gave Disney an advantage to produce what he wanted with little censorship because of such a well-known family name.

**Data and Methods**

The data for this project were collected using content analysis. The top ten grossing Disney princess films were chosen on the basis that they were the most viewed by the public. Each of the ten Disney princess movies were viewed at least three times and data were collected by using a code sheet created in order to study gender, race, and social class as portrayed in the films. I also noted the year of release for each film so they could by analyzed chronologically. My code sheet consisted of five categories; character attire, character attributes, living conditions, how leisure time is spent for the princess, and the outcome of the movie. I mainly focused on the princess character of each movie but I also noted references to race and class in all characters.

For character attire, I was categorizing appearance by typically male or female dominated traits. Female traits were marked by features such as dress, jewelry, long hair, make-up, and hair accessories. Male traits were boots, pants, hats, and short hair. The female and male traits of the character were studied to address gender issues. I also looked to see if dress was specific to culture and checked the overall condition/fashion of the clothing. These features were analyzed to represent race and social class issues.

In the category of character attributes, I also divided the categories into male and female traits to show gender stereotypes. Female traits were presentations of the following: weak, seeks advice, submissive, affectionate, shows emotion/crying, scared, victim, nurturing, gets rescued, soft voice, and goals of getting married. Male traits were shown as strong, explore, assertive, unemotional, athletic, brave, gives advice, hero, rescues, deep voice, and goals of work. For social class evaluation, I also checked for educated talk and if current life position was achieved or ascribed. More study on social class was completed by examining living conditions. These categories consisted of type of home, cleanliness of home, type of neighborhood, supportive or dominant family, who do they live with, and what type of items are in the home.

By analyzing how leisure time was spent for the princesses, gender norms became quite obvious. In this category female traits were cleaning, cooking/serving, dancing, singing, and interacting with animals. Male traits were classified as hunting/fishing, sports, walking/hiking, working, and hanging out with friends. The outcome of the movie showed social class by looking to see if the character experienced upward mobility, and gender norms were shown by noting if the princess married the main character.

If I found traits that were not on my list but I believed to be relevant, I wrote them in during my analysis. By viewing the movies multiple times, I was able to scrutinize my data for correct tallies of each observation. After data collection was complete, I analyzed the results for trends and made charts to mark my findings. I also compared my results to those found in previous work on the topic.

**Analysis**

Previous research has shown that little girls and boys incorporate movies they watch into scripts for play. That play turns into an agent of socialization. My own research showed that some very negative stereotypes were prevalent in the Disney princess movies. These negative stereotypes are shown in the categories of gender, race, and social class. Hurley (2005) argued that film and television are visual texts that serve as teachers (p. 227). From my findings it is clear that we need a new lesson.

First, let's look at some of the dialogue surrounding gender in the Disney princess movies. "It's about time you got your head out of those books and paid attention to more important things. Like me. The whole town's talking about it. It's not right for a woman to read. Soon, she starts getting 'ideas' and 'thinking'"- Gaston to Belle in *Beauty and the Beast.* This statement implies that it is unacceptable for women to be educated, and the primary goal should be to find a suitable mate. Girls are shown that possessing good looks and domestic skills will get you through life. In *Cinderella*, she is expected to make something acceptable to wear to the ball if she wishes to go. As she runs out of time, the mice step in to save the day. But, even they know their specific roles. One male mouse says "we can help" but the female mouse says "leave the sewing to the women." In *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel is pondering the trade-off of her voice for the chance at true love. Ursula assures her it will be fine because "you'll have your looks, your pretty face and don't underestimate the power of body language!" In *Snow White*, she stumbles into the dwarfs' house and finds it a complete disaster. Her immediate response is "you'd think their mother would clean." And finally, in *Mulan*, one of the soldiers divulges his take on women by singing "I couldn't care less what she'll wear or what she looks like. It all depends on what she cooks like." All of these stereotypical messages create a real problem in raising our youth. As England et al. (2011) discovered, "The strongly gendered messages present in the resolutions of the movies help to reinforce the desirability of traditional gender conformity" (p. 565).

The role of a princess is very gender specific. From my findings, a princess has a very particular look. Every princess had long hair with the exception of Snow White. They all wore dresses for the majority of the movie with the exception of Mulan. Most princesses wore make-up, jewelry, and either a headband or a crown. Their clothes are always clean and fashionable except for the case of Cinderella (before her fairy Godmother came to help her out). Next, we move on to how a princess spends her time. The majority of the time for the princesses was spent interacting with animals (29%), singing (24%), or dancing (13%). Some other categories mentioned were cooking, cleaning/serving, and primping/grooming. We hardly ever see a princess working or fighting. These unreal expectations hold little girls to an ideal that is unattainable. By teaching children that these princesses represent the social norm, we are setting them up for failure.



By comparing female vs. male traits over time, I was able to monitor the progression made by Disney regarding gender roles. In the three earliest movies, *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), almost no male traits were shown in the princess characters. In 1998, we saw a large spike in the male traits possessed by a princess but that was due to the fact that the princess was pretending to be a male in the film. Over time, progress has been made and the presence of a female princess displaying male traits has grown, but the progress is very slow. In the last movie released from the list, *Tangled* (2010), male traits were still shown less than 20 percent of the time as compared to traditional female traits.



One of my most disturbing findings regarding race was the original lyrics from the introduction of *Aladdin*. The characters are singing about a fictional Middle Eastern country and belt out "Where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face. It's barbaric but hey, it's home." The characters of this film are all of very light skin tone except those deemed "bad," who have dark skin and look traditionally middle-eastern. Jasmine was presented by Disney as an attempt to embrace races other than white in movies. But, other than her large eyes and slightly darkened skin, Jasmine's features are predominately white. The merchants are shown to be stupid and clumsy and evil in nature. In *The Princess and the Frog*, racial issues that would have been going on during that time frame are not addressed at all. Tiana and her mother would have been forced to sit at the back of the bus, and Tiana would not likely be purchasing a business. If racial issues are to be included in these films, they need to be incorporated accurately and historically intact.

Social class is shown in these movies by categorizing characters into two categories: the haves and the have-nots. Those who have not are shown struggling to get in to the top because that is where happiness lies. Even though Tiana's best friend (who is white) is very well off financially, she won't help Tiana until she receives something in return—for Tiana to cook for her. Then she throws money at her like it is no object. We also hear from *The Princess and the Frog* that "The real power in this world ain't magic, it's money!" Those of lower class are shown in a negative light and with little intelligence. These stereotypes give children the idea that being rich is the only way to succeed in life.

In an attempt to study social mobility in the movies, I made a chart outlining where the princess started out in life and where she ended up. This proved to be quite tricky because of the plots of the films. Cinderella was really the only rags to riches story. She started out from nothing and married her prince charming and had it all. Jasmine, Ariel, and Snow White were already princesses at the start of the movies. They really didn't have anywhere to go, but they were able to achieve even more happiness by marrying the man of their dreams. Aurora and Rapunzel were also princesses from the start of the movie but they didn't know it. So, they lived modest lives and received their true inheritance at the end of the stories. Belle and Tiana were also able to find happiness by marrying the man of their dreams and moving up the social ladder. Belle could now save her father, and Tiana could open her restaurant and pursue her dreams of being a chef. Mulan and Giselle are actually not princesses at all. Mulan achieved honor and her man, and Giselle found her true soul mate but they did not become princesses in the end. In the world of Disney that's ok, they are still included in the princess line in order to bring in the sales.

The movie *Enchanted* was somewhat of an outlier for my study. It was not the typical Disney princess movie. The movie starts out in animation and then turns into a regular film that is non-animated. It is a modern day Cinderella story with many modifications. The typical traits of a Disney princess are mocked and really overemphasized. I thought this would be a good example of how silly these princesses look and how their behavior is outrageous by today's standards. But, Giselle does end up winning her man at the end and it was due mainly to the fact that she was so sweet, simple, and naïve, displaying those princess-like traits.

*Mulan* also threw my results off a bit because this princess was portraying a male character for the majority of the movie. Mulan showed many male traits such as adventure seeking, brave, strong, assertive, fighter, and hero. But, those were not traits she would have been allowed to possess as a young woman. She had to disguise herself as a man in order to fight for her family and honor. Because it was so difficult for her, it showed us that these traits were abnormal and don't come easy to the opposite sex. Mulan's mother is unsuccessfully trying to prepare her for marriage and her father is ashamed by her actions as a female. The only way she can break out of these norms is to adopt the character of the opposite sex. In the end, Mulan falls for a man and gives up her new life for him. Brocklebank (2000) argued that "*Mulan* starts out strong with the portrayal of a cross-dressed heroine. But, loses integrity by transforming the cross-dresser into an acceptable figure in mainstream society" (268).

Sexuality is used as a tool for the majority of the women in these films. If a girl is beautiful, it is implied that the prince will fall in love with her in a matter of minutes. He will then rescue her at all costs so they can live out their lives together in happiness. Ariel, being without a voice, has to rely on her sexuality alone. Jasmine must use her sexuality to lure Jafar away from Aladdin. And, the princesses often have to give up something in the trade for being with their man: for Jasmine, her voice; for Belle, her freedom; for Rapunzel, her mother; and for Tiana, her dreams. These implications are important because of their influence on how young girls behave and form identities based on these lead female roles. As England et al. (2011) noted, "These social scripts, or constructions of gender norms, are present in the Disney Princess movies and have been shown in previous studies to influence viewers' beliefs and actions" (p. 566). Children model these behaviors and act out the roles. They identify with characters and persuade their parents to purchase the princess merchandise for further in-depth play. Girls are gaining an inaccurate depiction of what they should be, and boys are also learning that this is how girls look and behave. Children are being shown that white is pretty much the only race, and if another race does exist, it does not count for much and usually consists of bad guys. And, money matters. If you don't have it already or marry into it, your fairytale can't begin.

**Conclusion**

As researcher Breaux (2010) stated, "It is our job to keep asking questions, hold Disney accountable and not suspend our critical judgment on children's films" (p. 415). For parents and teachers, awareness of the negative impacts needs to be understood. Of course Disney is loved by millions of fans, and the stories will be considered classics for some time to come. But, we need to teach our children that these are not real life stories. We also need to teach the inaccuracies of the gender, race, and social class misrepresentations that are displayed. Although some progress has been made, we have a long way to go. Many gendered stereotypes still remain even in the current flicks. "The gendered messages did not consistently move away from traditional themes in more recent movies" (England et al., 2011, p. 566). In the films I studied, culture was not embraced; in some cases it was even dispelled. Children need to be taught to be proud of their heritage. No matter what Disney does, there will be some critics saying they are doing it wrong. But in the future, Disney needs to work harder to accurately portray race. And, films need to allow women and men to break out of the traditional gender roles.

As an alternative to these Disney princess films, Disney could produce more of the films that don't involve all of these social norms. Movies such as *Toy Story* and *Cars* have done just as well at the box office as the princess movies and don't involve such serious stereotypes. I would also like to make note that the movie *Brave* was not included in this list yet and I think it has really taken a stride in the right direction. The newest princess is somewhat of an anti-princess. She does not possess the typical traits of a princess and she is an adventurous girl always with her bow and arrow in hand. Merida has proven that girls can be different from the typical norm and that's ok. Girls need strong role models, and Disney princesses can be good role models in some sense but we don't want girls thinking this is all they can be, there are so many other options out there…

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