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**The Not So Wonderful World of Disney: An Exploratory  
Content Analysis of Gender Themes in Disney Full Length  
Animated Feature Films**

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**Abstract**

*Research has focused on the gender messages portrayed in television programs, cartoons, advertisements, literature, picture books, and fairy tales. One venue not included in the research is the Disney full-length animated feature films. The initial research on which this article is based was an exploration of the themes of gender, violence and anthropomorphism in Disney films. Emergent themes include heterosexual couplings, family constellations, good versus evil, and villains. This article will cover only the gender themes. Five areas were used to code gender content which include: physical appearance, personality traits, in-home labor, out of home employment, and societal and familial power. The this research indicate gender stereotypes are prevalent in Disney full-length animated feature films.*

**INTRODUCTION**

The name Disney means many different things to many people. From the time The Walt Disney Company, as it is known today, began in 1923 until present day, Disney has permeated many areas of American culture and has expanded beyond America's borders. Beginning with animated short subject films, Disney has expanded its empire to include motion picture companies, television

stations, interactive computer software, a National Hockey League team, a baseball team, stores, theme parks, hotels, Broadway shows, galleries, music soundtracks, books, merchandise and home-videos. The company has also entered into contracts with other major corporations such as Mattel and McDonald's to produce and market Disney characters mainly tied to theatrical and home video releases (Walt Disney Company 1996b).

The magnitude of The Walt Disney Company is difficult to imagine. Not only is Disney "Hollywood's biggest single movie producer...[it is also]... the strongest programming brand name in the world" (Maney 1995:163-164), but, this has not always been the case. When Michael D. Eisner and Frank G. Wells took over leadership of Disney in 1984 as Chairman/CEO and President/COO respectively, they were looking for ways to raise profits. One way they are doing is by offering the Disney classics, the full-length animated feature films, for sale at low prices. The idea is to make videos affordable for all households so people would buy instead of rent movies (Luckett 1994).

The strategy works. Disney realized profits of more than one hundred million dollars in 1986 (Gomery 1994). Buena Vista Home Video (BVHV) distributes Disney videos both nationally and internationally. BVHV North America remains the industry's top-ranked home video company. In sell-through business alone, it is nearly twice the size of its nearest rival (Walt Disney Company 1996a). In 1993 *Aladdin* became the number one selling home video of all time only to be surpassed by *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1994 which was surpassed by *The Lion King* in 1995. *The Lion King* sold over 30 million units (Walt Disney Company 1995a and 1995b). These home videos also fared well on the international market with *Aladdin* selling 15 million units, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* 16 million units and *The Lion King* 23

million units (Walt Disney Company 1995a).

There are 91,993,582 households in the United States (U.S. Census 1990) and when one considers *The Lion King* sold over 30 million units, almost one-third of U.S. households own a copy. Research has been conducted for years on the messages children get from television programs, cartoons, advertisements, literature, picture books, and fairy tales. But, what kind of messages are children getting from the Disney animated feature films? Some of the answers to that question are the focus of this article.

This project started as an exploratory content analysis of Disney's full-length animated feature films. At the time the project began, there were 34 such films with the 35th about to be released. Because this was an exploratory study, systematic sampling was not utilized nor were specific hypotheses tested. Selection of five films for this study was based on the original date they were produced. The 34 films span years from 1937 to 1996. The five films chosen were: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937); *Cinderella* (1950); *The Jungle Book* (1967); *The Little Mermaid* (1989); and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996)

This project started with ideas of what themes may be present but other themes emerged during the study. The themes assumed to be present before the analysis started were gender stereotypes, violence, and anthropomorphism. Some themes that emerged were the use of villains, heterosexual couplings, good versus evil, and family composition. This article will address the

portrayal of gender roles and the themes that emerged related to gender.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Children are socialized through various agents such as family, school, church, peer groups and the mass media. Children are socialized not only into the rules of society but also into how they should act based on their sex. Numerous studies have been conducted on gender representation in television, books, advertisements, and cartoons. Gender stereotypes present in early studies still exist today in children's television programming (Busby 1974; Peirce 1989), cartoons (Mayes and Valentine 1979; Thompson and Zerbino 1995), children's books (Peterson and Lach 1990; Williams et al. 1987), television advertisements (Lovdal 1989), and prime-time television programming (Signorielli 1989). In all venues examined, males were found to outnumber females by a ratio of 2 to 1 to as much as 4 to 1 (Busby 1974; Levinson 1975; Mackey and Hess 1982; Remafedi 1990; Streicher 1974; Thompson and Zervinos 1995; Williams et al. 1987; Zebrowitz-McArthur and Resko 1975).

Peterson and Lach (1990) and Williams et al. (1987) found the disparity between the number of males and females is narrowing, but it is still not equal. Kortenhuis and Demarest (1993) and Levinson (1975) found that when the gender of animals can be determined in children's literature, males again outnumber females. Males outnumber females in the voice overs on television commercials (Lovdal 1989; Streicher 1974), and female characters

in television cartoons have fewer lines (Streicher 1974).

The way the mass media portrays the personality traits of females and males fall along stereotyped gender lines. Females are depicted with those traits traditionally considered feminine. The women and girls in children's television programs and cartoons were found to be affectionate, emotional, sensitive and express romantic interests (Busby 1974; Streicher 1974). Females were shown as nurturing in prime-time television, picture books and children's literature (Kortenhaus and Demarest 1993; Signorielli 1989; Williams et al. 1987) and were depicted as passive in comic strips, cartoons, picture books and children's television programming (Busby 1974; Levinson 1975; Mooney and Brabant 1990; Williams et al. 1987).

Males, on the other hand, are characterized with those personality traits traditionally thought of as masculine. Kortenhaus and Demarest (1993), Streicher (1974), and Williams et al. (1987) found males characterized as independent. Males are also shown to have prestige and power (Signorielli 1989), to be assertive and athletic (Streicher 1974), and to have authority and the ability to solve problems (Kortenhaus and Demarest 1993).

The activities in which males and females participate are stereotyped in the various venues whether the characters are children or adults and whether they are at home or on the job. Hillman (1976) found that the number of occupational roles males and females are portrayed in children's literature has changed little from the 1930s to the 1970s. Males were depicted in a greater

variety of occupations when compared to females, and the ratio of five male occupations per one female occupation changed only slightly over the years to a ratio of 4:1. Lovdal (1989) found more variety of occupations for men in television commercials while women were portrayed in stereotyped roles such as wife and mother. In children's television programs, Busby (1974) found the occupations women were shown in are those at the bottom of the job hierarchy; wives took care of the home and child care while men performed maintenance chores and yard work.

This is consistent with the findings of Mackey and Hess (1982) and Levinson (1975) which showed women are more often depicted in socioemotional roles compared to males who are more often shown in task oriented or instrumental roles. Socioemotional roles are those associated with nurturing and meeting the needs of the family. These activities are more likely to be thought of as taking place in the home whereas instrumental tasks such as those that "deal with overt behavior manipulating the physical environment: e.g., building, fighting, plowing...[or]...clearing land" (Mackey and Hess 1982:204) are thought of as taking place outdoors. Mooney and Brabant (1990) in their study of comic strips found females less likely to interact with others outside the home and that daughters are not pictured outdoors as much as sons. Females were found in the home more often in television commercials (Zebrowitz-McArthur and Resko 1975) and picture books (Williams et al. 1987).

The location in which men and women are pictured has an impact on what type of objects they are shown using or selling. In

a study of what type of artifacts are used by women and men in children's books, Crabb and Brelawski (1994) found women are mostly shown using artifacts related to home labor such as those for cleaning, cooking, or family care while men use those related to outdoor activities like transportation and construction. Females were found to represent in-home products in television commercials (Lovdal 1989; Zebrowitz-McArthur and Resko 1975), and men were not depicted doing housework in cartoons (Streicher 1974).

## CONTENT ANALYSIS

The five films studied tend to follow the gender messages and stereotypes in the literature reviewed. The five classifications used by Busby (1974) to define sex-role standards in network children's programs were used for coding the gender content in the Disney films. The five areas include: physical appearance, personality traits, in-home labor, out of home employment, and societal and familial power. Males outnumber females in all the stories when all the characters are considered including the animals. Following are the male to female ratios for each story: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* 9:2, *Cinderella* 8:6, *The Jungle Book* 11:3, *The Little Mermaid* 8:4, and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* 8:3. When only the major characters are considered females are still outnumbered by males.

The females in these stories are presented as either attractive and good or unattractive and evil. Snow White, Cinderella, Ariel and Esmeralda are all pretty, shapely women, some more so than others. The girl from the man village in

*The Jungle Book* is also attractive, but it is difficult to determine if she is good as she is a minor character at the end of the story and never speaks, but only sings. With the exception of Esmeralda, all the girls appear to be very young. Ariel is a teenager, Snow White and Cinderella appear to be teenagers, and the girl from the man village appears to be pre-pubescent. Esmeralda, on the other hand, appears to be older, possibly in her early to mid-twenties. All of these females have attractive facial features, are thin, and have hourglass figures with somewhat or very developed breasts. It was difficult to determine if this was true for the girl from the man village. The females are all in dresses with feminine adornments such as bows in their hair or wearing aprons.

The females considered to be evil in these stories are unattractive. The stepmother and two stepsisters in *Cinderella* and the Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* are thin, but the facial features of these girls and women are unattractive. The facial features are exaggerated and include such things as long narrow faces, long, pointed or wide and upturned noses, fat cheeks, and unflattering hair styles. Ursula, in *The Little Mermaid*, is a sea witch appearing half human and half octopus. Ursula has a large figure, a pointy nose, large eyes, a big red mouth, black claw-like finger nails, and a loud, booming, sinister voice.

The heroic males who get the attractive girls in the end are themselves handsome. Prince Eric, Prince Charming, the Prince in *Cinderella* and Captain Phebus appear to be tall, broad shouldered, narrow waisted, muscled arms, chiseled faces, and small unexaggerated facial features. These observations don't hold true

for Mowgli as he is only ten years old. It is possible he would be attractive to a ten year-old girl. None of the other male characters (excluding the animals) are attractive. They appear to be older, white haired, or bald, short, and fat. Or they are tall, lanky, and have exaggerated facial features.

The personality traits of the women tend to follow traditional stereotypes, but there are some exceptions. The attractive heroines all have romance interests, even though it is not as obvious with Esmeralda. At one point early on, she makes sultry eyes at the Captain, and he later tries to kiss her but fails. They do end up together but this does not appear to be her goal throughout the story. Snow White wishes the Prince would carry her away to his castle, while Ariel is told to get her head out of the clouds when she is dreaming of Prince Eric. Ariel's father also notices she has been acting peculiarly, daydreaming, and singing to herself. Cinderella dreams of a Prince and is upset when she can't go to the ball, but after she does go, she hangs onto the one glass slipper to be sure the Prince will learn she was the girl at the ball. The girl from the man village sings of having a husband and how she will do the cooking.

The four major females at some point were rescued in some way. Snow White was rescued once by the Huntsman who was sent to kill her, he didn't follow the Queen's orders, let her go, and warned her about the Queen, and so was saved. The dwarfs try to rescue Snow White when the Queen is going to poison her, but they are too late, so she is later rescued from the deep sleep when the Prince kisses her. Cinderella is rescued from the attic by the

male mice who get the key to the attic where she had been locked up by her stepmother. Cinderella is also rescued by her fairy godmother so she could attend the ball, and she was rescued from being a slave in her own home by the Prince. Prince Eric is to rescue Ariel from Ursula by kissing her so she would get her voice back, but the kiss doesn't actually happen. In the *Hunchback of Notre Dame* Quasimodo and the Captain go to rescue Esmeralda from Frollo because he indicates he knew where the gypsies were hiding. Quasimodo rescues her again when she hung onto him, and they swing out of Notre Dame on a rope.

The fact that the females have to be rescued indicates they are passive, weak, and dependent upon males. Cinderella and Snow White are both treated as slaves or maids in their own homes. They don't complain about their treatment or about the work they have to do. These girls are obedient, gentle, and docile. Esmeralda finds herself in the middle of being chased, and wonders, "What is a poor girl to do?" indicating helplessness. Ariel's father indicates that Sebastian is to keep an eye on her because he thinks someone needs to watch over her, and keep her out of trouble.

With the exception of Esmeralda, these female characters are emotional. Ariel lays on a rock and cries when her father smashes a statue of Prince Eric. Cinderella sits in the garden and cries when her stepsisters tear her dress off, and she can't go to the ball. Snow White falls to the ground crying when she is running through the forest.

It is difficult to assess the personality traits of the male

heros because some of them do little speaking. This holds true for the Princes in *Cinderella* and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. It may be safe to say four of the five leading men are shallow, and pick their women on superficial factors; e.g., beautiful looks, or outward features. The Prince falls for Cinderella as soon as she walked into the ball. After he finds the glass slipper fit her foot, he marries her. Prince Charming falls for Snow White the first time he sees her at the well in the beginning of the story. When he kisses her and she wakes up, they ride off together and live happily ever after.

Prince Eric falls in love with Ariel because she has the most beautiful voice. Prince Eric indicates early in the story that when he finds the right girl it will hit him like "lightning." Ariel's singing was the so called "lightning." Mowgli falls for the beautiful girl from the man village the first time he sees her, and he follows her back there. In all four of these stories the males know nothing about the females, and in the case of Prince Eric, and Mowgli, they have never spoken to the girls. Captain Phebus and Esmeralda end up together without knowing much about each other, but they have at least spent some time together fighting off the enemy and have more interaction with each other than any of the other couples did.

Mowgli, Prince Eric, and Captain Phebus are all independent, strong, and brave. Mowgli is not afraid of Shere Kahn, the man eating tiger. He tells Bagheera and Baloo he is not afraid, and goes into the jungle on his own. When he encounters Shere Kahn, he is not intimidated, and stands up to him. Prince Eric refuses to marry a princess because she is not the one for him.

He also runs through fire to save his dog from the sinking ship. Captain Phebus is a war hero, helps Frolo in his army, but later rescues people from a burning house. Frolo wants the Captain to start the house on fire, but he refuses. At times Quasimodo shows these same traits. He shows independence when he defies Frolo, and goes to the festival of fools. He shows strength, and bravery when he breaks free of chains to help Esmeralda escape from Notre Dame. And again, when he goes to warn the gypsies about Frolo finding them.

Male characters, who are not lead males, are assertive, but this may be a result of their societal or familial power. The Archdeacon stops Frolo from throwing Quasimodo down the well as a baby, and he tells Frolo he will be the baby's guardian, and raise him. King Triton is assertive with Ariel when he learns she rescued a human. He tells her he expects the rules to be obeyed. The King in *Cinderella* asserts his power when he orders the Grand Duke to hold a ball to find his son, the Prince, a wife because he wants grandchildren. One might think the huntsman, who tells Snow White the Queen was trying to kill her, and allowed her to go free, is being assertive, and exercising his independence.

There is not much variety in occupations depicted in these stories. Most of the positions held by main male characters are positions of nobility, and those held by the minor male characters are assistants to those in positions of power and prestige. The male occupations in *Cinderella* include a Prince, a King, and the Grand Duke. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* there is a Prince and a huntsman who work for the Queen. Shere Kahn, the tiger, is King

of the Jungle in *The Jungle Book*, and the other two positions mentioned are that of King Louie, the King of the Apes, and the Colonel who leads the elephant herd. King Triton, King of the Sea, Prince Eric, and his servant Grimsby, are the male occupations in *The Little Mermaid*. In *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Frollo is a judge referred to as "your honor," the Arch Deacon is the head of the church, and Captain Phebus is a captain in the army. Other occupations held by males in these films (animals included) are bell ringer, chef, sailor, court conductor, and diamond miners.

There are few occupations held by females whether in or out of the home. Snow White and Cinderella are the only two characters who really perform any in home labor doing excessive amounts of cooking, cleaning, sewing, and laundry among other household chores. The girl from the man village is responsible for fetching water.

The stepmother and two stepsisters in *Cinderella* do no work whatsoever. One female mouse does tell the male mice to fetch items to make Cinderella's dress and to "leave the sewing to the women." There are two mothers depicted in *The Jungle Book*, Winifred, the mother elephant, and the mother wolf who raise Mowgli with her wolf cubs.

Other occupations for females evident in these stories are Snow White's stepmother, the Queen, Esmeralda, a gypsy, and a minor character of a waitress in *The Little Mermaid*. There is no visible occupation for Ursula, the sea witch, but she does aspire to take over King Triton's position as ruler of the sea. Ariel sings in

the court choir, and in *Cinderella* there is a fairy godmother but this isn't really an occupation to which people aspire.

## DISCUSSION

The gender stereotypes depicted in other forms of mass media and literature are also present in these Disney films. There are some situations where females defy those stereotypes, but they are rare. Ariel is headstrong, independent, adventurous, and defies her father, but in the end she seeks what the other heroines seek, a man to marry and care for her. Esmeralda also defies stereotypes in that she is strong, athletic, and fights men, but she is also compassionate and sensitive to Quasimodo. Ariel helps to fight against Ursula, and at one point pulls her hair which is usually considered a method of female fighting. Ariel and Esmeralda both rescue men before they later have to be rescued themselves. These two films were released in 1989 and 1996 respectively. Perhaps it is possible Disney is attempting to portray some female characters with less stereotypical behaviors, and make them more androgenous.

Even though strides have been made to equal the gap between the number of male and female characters in different forms of media, gaps still exist. Numbers presented do not reflect reality. Maybe the message being sent is that women are insignificant or not equal to men.

Physical traits of characters in Disney films follow what has already been found in other venues, the characters with good,

positive, and socially acceptable attributes are attractive. These attractive characters are the heroes and heroines. All other characters, whether evil or not, are unattractive, have exaggerated features, or are old. The female heroines in these films are all young and beautiful, and four of the five appear to be teenagers. This follows what Levinson (1975) and Streicher (1974) found in cartoons, that females tend to be young, juvenile or teenage girls who are pretty. Remafedi (1990) and Signorielli (1989) found the same to be true on television, and Busby (1974) found females are smaller unless they are villains in which case they are large. In these Disney films not all the villains are large, but the one large woman, Ursula, is a villain.

There is not a wide range of occupations depicted in these stories although, of those shown, the men had a wider range. The occupations shown do not give boys or girls much to aspire to. The roles of Queen and fairy godmother are not occupations girls could actually aspire to. The other options based on these films would be to be a gypsy, singer in a choir, wife and mother. Girls could aspire to be a princess, but the odds of it actually happening in real life are about zero, especially in this country. As Hillman (1976) states "the limited range of occupational roles for women presents a restrictive, servile view of adulthood to many children...authors are not portraying many females in exciting, prestigious, well-paying jobs. If children's literature is a force in the socialization of youth, this narrow view could severely limit children's aspirations" (p.4). In these films no women worked for pay except Esmeralda who danced in the streets for tip money. This may be related to the time period in which the stories are set.

In feudal societies there is little wage labor.

The above statement by Hillman is also true of the occupations presented for men in these stories. The occupations depicted for men show royalty, such as Kings and Princes, or else men who work for royalty. Since positions of royalty are based on birth rights, they do not provide realistic examples of men's occupations. Realistic representations include being a church leader, a member of the military, and a judge. These are not portrayed accurately as a judge does not make judgements as Frodo did nor do judges behave the way he did, ordering people killed and houses burned.

Signorielli and Learn (1992) found children's stereotyped attitudes toward chores are positively related to television. The more television the children watch, the more likely they are to classify chores based on sex. O'Bryant and Corder-Bolz (1978) found that children classify roles as being for males or females more when they have seen those roles portrayed on television. Based on these results it could be expected children who watch the Disney videos over and over again would tend to do the same thing. This is a possible area for further research.

There are some methodological problems with trying to code the content dealing with gender issues. The first problem is trying to determine which characters are major characters and which ones are minor. This might be done based on the amount of time characters are shown, but this would be very time consuming if one were to analyze a representative cross-section or all 35 of the Disney films. A second problem deals with coding personality traits as the traits are descriptive and coding depends on subjective judgements.

## **EMERGING THEMES**

Although this project started with some specific themes in mind, other themes emerged during the course of the study. The first emerging theme was the family constellation. Not one of the main characters in the five stories has what is considered the "traditional" family; two parents and their children. This observation is interesting because some researchers point to the culture at the time the earlier movies were made and that the gender stereotypes in some fairy tales represent the culture at that time. Yet, the three older movies; *Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella* and *The Jungle Book* do not represent the traditional family of that time.

Another emerging theme is that of good versus evil. The caretakers of the children in three of the stories were also the villains. It appears that those who are good triumph in the end and those who are evil get what is coming to them. In *The Little Mermaid*, *Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, the evil villains die in the end. The fate of the villains in *Cinderella* and *The Jungle Book* is not really known.

At the end of each story, the main male and female characters end up together, which turns out to be another emergent theme, heterosexual relationships. At the end of *Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, and *The Little Mermaid*, marriage is the outcome although it is only implied with Snow White and Prince Charming. It is never said that they marry but the movie ends with them riding off together and the words "And they lived happily ever after" appear on the screen. In *The Jungle Book* and

*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, marriage is not indicated nor necessarily implied, but the males and females end up with each other.

Another theme is how females and males meet, fall in love, and couple. Disney presents distorted images of love. Love is shown to happen at first sight. The male and female characters in these films base life decisions on superficial qualities such as looks or the sound of a voice. Girls are led to believe looks are what count and that a pretty face is all that is necessary to get a husband. If girls get these messages and are led to believe only pretty girls get husbands then the reverse may be true. If one is unattractive don't count on marriage.

The characters never really get to know each other, have no idea about the other person's personality traits, or their history. Those who marry a prince may need no further information beyond the fact of royalty. But, that alone does not make two people compatible. The males know nothing of females' backgrounds, and in the case of nobility marrying, this is not realistic.

Another issue involved with these heterosexual couplings is the age of those involved. Except for *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, the girls in the other four films appear to be in puberty. The female characters being teenagers and marrying is another distortion of reality. There appears to be a noticeable age difference between the males and females with the exception of Mowgli and the girl from the man village. The message seems to be that women should marry older men or that marrying older men is socially acceptable. This has been a traditional view in this society while the

opposite, older women marrying younger men, has not. Contemporary women are not socialized to marry as teenagers, in fact, it is frowned upon. Society is also skeptical of whirlwind romances, instead, stressing getting to know someone before making major decisions.

Granted these stories are fairy tales and people should be able to fantasize about the romantic aspects, but marriage is a reality for many people, and it does not live up to the fantasy. These fairy tales lead people to believe in the "happily ever after." Many people may approach marriage with these attitudes, but with a divorce rate in this country about fifty percent, it is not realistic. These stories show nothing of what happens after the marriage ceremony. The audience never knows if the females marry into a life of servitude as wife and mother or if the rest of their lives are fantasy too.

Some authors have addressed the issue of courtship and marriage in fairy tales. Lieberman (1989) refers to marriage as the "fulcrum" of most fairy tales and sees being beautiful and chosen as the reward system in these stories. Rowe (1989) states that "because the heroine adopts conventional female virtues, that is patience, sacrifice, and dependency, and because she submits to patriarchal needs, she consequently receives both the prince and a guarantee of social security through marriage" (p. 217).

In films studied here, men have status, prestige, and one assumes wealth, due to their position. With the exception of Mowgli, who was only ten years old, three of the leading men were

princes and one was a captain. Females in these stories seem to get their sense of identity from men as they all dream of the man they will marry. Fairy tales then "are not just entertaining fantasies, but powerful transmitters of romantic myths which encourage women to internalize only aspirations deemed appropriate to our 'real' sexual functions within a patriarchy" (Rowe 1989: 211).

A problem with the way marriage is portrayed in these fairy tales is that the story ends after the marriage and the audience is led to believe they lived happily ever after. The problem is this is not realistic. Lieberman (1989) states that the "focus upon courtship, which is magnified into the most important and exciting part of a girl's life, brief though courtship is, because it is the part of her life in which she most counts as a person herself ... When fairy tales show courtship as exciting and conclude with marriage ... children may develop a deep-seated desire to be courted since marriage is literally the end of the story" (p. 199).

## **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Because this was an exploratory study, no single theory was proposed as a framework in which to explain the themes explored. Instead, theory was explored after the themes were uncovered to determine which theory may best be used to explain the themes put forth in these films. The literature review uncovered the use of various theories to explain the messages perpetuated by the mass media and the effects of those messages on individuals and society. Structural functionalism is one theory that can be used to explain the themes relating to the gender issues discovered in these films.

Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer proposed an analogy of society liking it to that of biological organisms (Conklin 1984). Biological organisms are comprised of various structures, each with specific functions such as the human body. Comte and Spencer view society the same way, comprised of various structures such as the family and schools, which serve specific functions such as socialization and education. Functions are the patterned and repetitive actions of the social system. The structures they discuss serve to keep society in a state of equilibrium.

Those theorists who follow this tradition are concerned with social order and how society endures over time (Conklin 1984). Theorists view the basis of social order arising from the shared beliefs and values of the members of a society and the interrelationships between individuals, groups, and institutions (Conklin 1984).

Robert Merton was concerned with how institutions contribute to the social order based on the contributions they make. Merton distinguished between manifest and latent functions. Manifest functions are those "results that people consciously try to attain, and latent functions...are produced by the actions of the social system itself" (Collins 1994:198). Simply put, manifest functions are intended, latent functions are not. Merton also proposed the idea of dysfunction. While other theorists believed structures function to create a state of equilibrium to uphold the social order, Merton believed structures could have negative consequences for other structures (Collins 1994; Ritzer 1992).

Merton summarized the principles of structural functionalism concerning the nature of society as follows:

1. A society can best be thought of as a system of interrelated parts; it is an organization of interconnected, repetitive, and patterned activities.
2. Such a society naturally tends toward a state of dynamic equilibrium; if disharmony occurs, forces will arise tending to restore stability.
3. All of the repetitive activities in a society make some contribution toward its state of equilibrium; in other words, all persisting forms of patterned action play a part in maintaining the stability of the system.
4. At least some of the patterned and repetitive actions in a society are indispensable to its continued existence; that is, there are functional prerequisites that fill critical needs of the system without which it would not survive (as cited in DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach 1982:16).

How do these assumptions relate to the themes found in the Disney films studied? Gender-role development results from socialization. As cited in Remafedi (1990) socialization is "the way people learn about their culture and acquire some of its values, beliefs, perspectives and social norms...[and]...this learning occurs by...observation of male and female images in the media" (p.59). Others have addressed this issue regarding fairy tales, animated films, and television. Giroux (1997) sees animated films as producers of culture in that "these films appear to inspire at least as much cultural authority and legitimacy for teaching specific roles,

values, and ideals as do the more traditional sites of learning..." (p.53). Mackey and Hess (1982), citing Davidson and Gordon, point out that "the socialization process includes the development of gender identity, as well as the learning of the dominant social definitions of reality, including gender-roles" (p.212). The media serves as an agent of this socialization. Lieberman (1989) found that women are acculturated to traditional social roles through fairy tales, and Stone (1975) citing Eric Berne, notes that the fairy tale may "inform your attitudes and acts" (p.48)

The mass media is one of the structures of a society and the Disney films are a part of this institution. The mass media at times serves to educate and entertain (manifest functions) and to socialize members of a society. The socialization function may be a latent function of the media as it is questionable whether socialization was an intended consequence. Keeping in mind that functions are patterned and repetitive, the messages put forth in these Disney films (which include the attitudes, values, and beliefs of what is appropriate behavior for males and females) can be considered nonmaterial social facts. These messages are external to the individual yet become part of individuals' thinking, and the collective conscience that maintains equilibrium. These ideas are coercive in that those who violate the norms are disruptive or create disharmony for the masses.

As Merton points out, not all structures serve to maintain equilibrium and those structures that create negative consequences can be dysfunctional. The mass media contributes to social disharmony when the messages put forth have negative

consequences. The gender stereotypes depicted in the Disney films do just that. These films send the messages that individuals must behave in particular ways based on their being male or female that serves to subjugate women to traditional gender-roles. Keeping women in traditional roles keeps the equilibrium of the social order. It is only when groups take action against these messages and the treatment of women in society that the equilibrium is upset. Thus, traditional gender roles are functional for society.

## CONCLUSION

This content analysis of full-length animated Disney films indicates the wonderful world of Disney may not be as wonderful as people believe. The perpetuation of gender stereotypes, the presentation of family constellations, and the process of heterosexual coupling are only three of the negative messages contained in these films. With all the concern about what children see on television, it is curious that parents do not question what their children see in these films. Granted, some of these films were made before television existed, but it is only in the last ten years that these films have been made available to purchase for home viewing allowing children to watch them repeatedly.

There are many areas for future research regarding these films. A comparison could be made between the older films and the more recent ones to determine if, or how, the messages have changed over time. Another possibility is to study the perceptions of children and adults as they relate to the violence in these films. Although not much was done on the villains in this study, they

provide another area for further study. It may be that with further research, including children and parents, the parents may realize the wonderful world of Disney is not quite as wonderful as they thought.

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