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### *Review Essay*

## **Raising Princesses? Gender socialisation in early childhood and the Disney Princess franchise**

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This essay is an exploration of some of the messages portrayed to children through the Disney Princess franchise about gender roles. Gender socialisation processes in relation to the Disney Princess brand are reviewed with reference to the reductionist model of female roles in the Disney Princess franchise. The feminine values which Disney portray are explored in relation to the feminine qualities of the Disney Princess, hidden messages behind the Disney lyrics, the sexualisation of the Disney villainesses and concealed messages about abuse of women in Disney.

Sociologists such as West and Zimmerman (1987) define gender as the social dimension of being male or female. Sociologists believe that gender roles are learned from a child's environment. They argue that society teaches people the behaviours which society deems appropriate for their sex. 'Socialisation refers to the processes by which people come to adopt the behaviours deemed appropriate in their culture' (Burr 1998: p38). All known cultures have some division of roles and responsibilities based on ones sex (Maccoby, 1988, cited in Eichstedt et al., 2002). Margaret Mead undertook an interesting study in this area. Her research in 1935 found three cultures

with three different views of female gender roles. The Mundugumor (now Biwat) tribe saw women as violent and aggressive. The Tchambuli tribe (now Chambri) viewed women as managerial and impersonal. Contrastingly, the Arapesh tribe was somewhere where women are generally seen as peaceful and passive individuals.

In western culture, femininity is equivalent to a nurturing personality and aggressiveness is equated to masculinity. The social context is depended upon by these behaviours and characteristics. Scholars refer to these as 'gender' and 'gender roles' in order to differentiate social roles and behaviours from biological features. Sex and gender are intertwined therefore social expectations are performed once the biological makeup of the individual is revealed (Vasques, Melba and de las Fuentes, cited in Johnson and Roberts, 1999). Children are born sexed but gender is something which is learned. Individuals are taught to be masculine or feminine (Lorber, 1994). Bandura's theory on social learning maintained that through the process of modelling, children acquired new behaviours. Kohlberg's theory, on the other hand, (1966, cited in Bussey and Bandura, 1999) states that gender identity is the basic organizer and regulator of an individual's gender learning. Kohlberg believed that once children acknowledge their own gender identity, the interaction between one's behaviour and thoughts leads to gender constancy. Kohlberg defined constancy as the '...realization that one's sex is a permanent attribute tied to underlying biological properties and does not depend on superficial characteristics such as hair length...' (Ibid, p.4) Gender constancy encompasses three areas, gender identity, stability and consistency. Gender identity describes the time where a child is able to label oneself as a boy or girl. Stability requires the acknowledgement that gender remains constant over time. Lastly, gender consistency is usually mastered between the ages of six and seven. This requires the recognition that gender is invariant despite changes in appearance, dress or activity. (Ibid)

Bern's (1981) theory of gender schemas emphasises the importance of past experiences. She felt that individuals build up an integral conceptual framework into which new information is assimilated. Once gender schemas are formed, stereotyping as gender consistent information is encoded more efficiently and is also better

remembered. Encoding information into one's long-term memory can be achieved through rehearsal, organisation and elaboration. Rehearsal involves repetitively verbalising or thinking about info, i.e. singing the lyrics of Disney songs.

Organisation involves grouping linked information together in a meaningful way and elaboration requires the child to make associations between items to help recall them better. (Bousfield, 1953) An example of this would be a young girl noticing that all Disney Princesses look a certain way, act a certain way and all get married. This is then stored in their long term memory through repeatedly watching the Disney movies and/or singing the Disney songs.

Socio-cultural regulations relate to female gender roles and sexuality more often than to those of males. Objectified conceptions of female gender and sexuality in society and how these notions are socially constructed can be illuminated in popular culture. (Butler, 1990; Davies, 2003; Faludi, 1991; Ussher, 1989; Wine, 1985, cited in Lee, 2008) Stereotypes of women, in the overarching patriarchal narrative, determine the female character's roles in Disney films instead of being determined by the character's own intentions. (Bell et al., 1995; Giroux, 1995, 1997, 1999; Kasturi, 2002; Lieberman, 1972; O' Brien, 1995, cited in Lee, 2008) The Disney Princesses are generally depicted as victims who are weak and passive. (Bell et al, 1995; Giroux, 1995, 1997; O'Brien, 1995; Warner, 1992; Zipes, 1995, cited in Lee, 2008)

The Disney Princess franchise brings together eight heroines from Walt Disney Pictures animated film classics; Snow White, Jasmine from Aladdin, Belle from Beauty and the Beast, Pocahontas, Mulan, Cinderella, Ariel from The Little Mermaid and Aurora from Sleeping Beauty. The creation of this brand

amplifies the discourse of emphasized femininity by bringing together the eight heroines, homogenizing them by highlighting their common beauty ideal and washing out their slight variations in personality and power to control their own destinies. (Wohlwend, 2009:66)

The franchise produced four billion dollars in global retail sales for Disney in 2007, making it the most successful property ever for Disney toys. (Disney Consumer Products, 2007, cited in Wohlwend, 2009)

Childhood cultures encompass intertwined narratives that cross, TV, toys, clothes and pencil cases. Teachers find themselves having to compete with global narratives, which leave their cultural and linguistic messages losing relevance and power. (New London Group, 1996, cited in Wohlwend, 2009) The Disney franchise covers a dazzling array of products including animated films, toys, clothing, make-up and even Cinderella cleaning supplies (Iger, 2006; Noon, 2005, cited in Wohlwend, 2009) for young housewives-to-be. Disney products include definite themes and values which are, at times, biased and unwholesome. (Wasko, 2001) When discussing the design of girl's clothing Holden (2003) made an interesting point. While boy's clothes are designed for action, girl's are 'dressed to impress'. Holden also makes the point that girl's clothing is traditionally designed to constrain females. This is especially true of the Disney Princess clothing line. With the brand's tiaras, plastic slippers and ball gowns, the Disney Princess is hardly equipped for adventure. 'It's hard to climb in a skirt' (Holdren, 2003)

Baring in mind that the target market for this brand is girls aged 3-5 years, (Wohlwend, 2009) it is important to note that infants have been shown to form categories of 'male and female' during their first year of life. (Leinbach & Fagot, 1993, cited in Eichstedt et al., 2002) Haugh et al. (1980, cited in Cowan and Hoffman, 1986) found that children as young as three years old significantly stereotyped an infant labelled boy or girl on trait attributions. Research was undertaken by Wenraub et al. (1984, cited in Cowan and Hoffman, 1986) on sex role acquisition. It found that the majority of the 26-month-old children studied were able to demonstrate verbal gender labelling of pictures of males and females. Verbal and non-verbal gender identity was observed in the majority by 2 years and 7 months of age. A study embarked upon by Williams et al (1975, cited in Martin and Halverson, 1981) showed that it is only around ten or eleven years of age that children are aware of the more subtle personality traits associated with each sex.

The target market's age is a time when the distinction between reality and fantasy is blurry. Fowler and McCormick felt the introduction of fairy tales at this age leads children to accept the stereotypical roles which are assigned to their gender. (cited in O'Brien, 1996, cited in Tonn, 2008) Piagetian theory (1929, 1930, cited in Sharon and Woolley, 2004) states that children have difficulty in observing the boundary between reality and fantasy. This is backed up by research which presents high levels of belief in fantastical entities such as Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny which to adults appear unequivocally unrealistic. (Clark, 1995; Pretentice, Manosevitz and Hubbs, 1978; Rosengren, Kalish, Hickling and Gelman, 1994, cited in Sharon and Woolley, 2004)

Between the ages of three and ten years, children gradually become more accurate in distinguishing fantasy from reality on television. However, some younger children believe that everything on television is real. A study done in this area showed that three-year-olds ran to get a paper towel to clean up an egg which was shown breaking on the television. (Morrison and Gardner, 1978) Another piece of research found that the majority of four-year-olds studied believed Big Bird and Bugs Bunny were real. (Howard, 1998,) However, I could find no research regarding Disney in this area. As a result, I would like to include questions in my research which would investigate the children's perception of reality in the Disney Princess movies.

In order to research this topic, it is important not only to look at the impact which Disney films can have but to examine the influence of television viewing as a whole. From the preschool years, television observation among children is high. (Wright and Huston, 1983, cited in Bussey and Bandura, 1999) It has been approximated that children born in the early 70's will have spent more time watching television than in any other single activity other than sleep by the age of eighteen. (cited in Liebert, Neale and Davidson, 1973, cited in Tonn, 2008) Stereotyped gender role modelling is portrayed to a vast audience with diverse backgrounds through the media. Those with higher rates of television watching have been shown to display stronger stereotypical views than those with lower levels. (McGhee and Frueh, 1980, cited in Bussey and

Bandura, 1999) Young children tend to believe that television provides an accurate picture of the real world. This theory has been supported by a study done by Lyle and Hoffman which found that a large proportion of the children studied believed that television characters were like real people most of the time. (Liebert et al., 1973, cited in Tonn, 2008) Salomon (cited in Manley-Casimir and Luke, cited in Tonn, 2008) wrote that if children were not in possession of a realistic schema about gender, television representations will be used to form their schema. He also warned that while their schema is adaptable, it may not assimilate new information which conflicts with their existing schema.

Television programs can be viewed as instructions. Like a pupil, the child learns from the content of the television (Liebert et al. 1973, cited in Tonn, 2008) and emulates the behaviour of the character with whom she identifies with, for example, a Disney Princess. Social learning theory cites imitation of models as the most important element in gender role learning. (Papalia, Gross and Feldman, 2003, cited in Tonn, 2008) Since social modelling appears to have such a powerful influence on a child's gender role stereotyping, it seems appropriate to examine media whose target market are at the age where gender stereotyping first becomes apparent. Media based influences are important in a child's understanding of normative social roles and structure. Cartoons need to be understood as vessels for '...serious and legitimate socially sustained messages.' (Silverman, 2009:3)

In order to discuss socialisation, it is important to look at the qualities presented as feminine in Disney movies and explore what messages are being portrayed to children. Domesticity is a definite goal for early Disney's heroines. Snow White house-trains the dwarves. She is depicted as the perfect housewife. She sings and animals love her. She cooks and cleans the house for the seven male dwarves while they are out working hard all day. Belle too, is offered a domesticated role as a wife by both Gaston and the Beast. (Byrne and McQuillan, 2000, cited in Sumera, 2009) In discussing the recurring theme of the domestication of Disney women, Zipes (1995, cited in Sumera, 2009:42) describes Disney heroines as '...helpless ornaments in need of protection, and when it comes to the action of the film, they are omitted'.

A similar theme is portrayed in *The Little Mermaid*. In trade for her voice, Ursula gives Ariel a set of legs so that she can meet her love interest Eric. Ariel is literally silenced by her desperate need for male approval. ‘‘Shut up and be beautiful’, the movie seems to tell young girls.’ (Maio, 1998) Likewise, at the beginning of *Beauty and the Beast*, Belle is seen with a book in her hand. She encounters the baker and tries to tell him about the book she is reading but she is ignored. From this point, we understand that the townspeople think of Belle as an outsider. The quality of being well read is seen as unnatural. This adds to the subtext that feminist notions are deviant to the patriarchal society. Even Belle’s beauty distances her from the people, since she doesn’t use it to get herself a husband and settle down. Maio (1998) describes the portrayal of passive domestic women as ‘prototypical Disney’. Young women are depicted as ‘...natural-born happy homemakers who lie in a state of suspended animation until a man gives them a life.’ (Ibid) The Disney heroines mask independence as rebellious desires to flee their gendered constraints. This is later negated when the Princesses are shown to revert back to a patriarchy through marriage. (Sumera, 2009) Examples of this are seen in *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Little Mermaid* where both Disney Princesses at first seek adventure but later give this up for marriage.

Some hope to a more equal portrayal of gender roles was brought about by the release of Disney’s animated version of *Pocahontas*. *Pocahontas* was hailed as a new active version of the Disney Princess, an adventurous woman who stands up for her beliefs. (Gabriel, 1995; Henke et al., 1996; James, 1995 and Riemenschneider, 1995, cited in Dundes, 2001) She continues to stand out as one of the few female protagonists whose story does not end in matrimony. However, while *Pocahontas* does indeed fulfil her dreams of adventure, she forgoes further adventure in England with her love interest by staying home. Unlike the real *Pocahontas* who became an ambassador for her tribe, the Disney Princess adopts the gender stereotyped role of the woman as chief nurturer for her community. One author argues that a hidden message of the self-sacrifice of motherhood undertones the end of the film (Dundes, 2001).

Pocahontas sacrifices her ambition and needs, for the welfare of others. (Henke et al., 1996, cited in Dundes, 2001) Promoting nurturance as a woman's primary goal can lead to dependence on others for approval and self-esteem. One has to wonder about Pocahontas's sense of accomplishment and happiness in the future and whether she is a suitable role model for young girls in this sense. (Dundes, 2001)

The lyrics in Disney film's can also effect children's perceptions of gender roles. Haugh et al. (1980, cited in Cowan and Hoffman, 1986) noted a correlation between verbal associative concept learning and early associative stereotype learning. Their research found that children as young as three significantly stereotyped an infant labelled boy or girl on trait attributions. Rinsland (1945, cited in Cowan and Hoffman, 1986) wrote that 'people' words are among the first learned by children for example (boy, girl, man, lady, men and women.) Work such as this suggests that genderized labels may play a stronger role in the child's early verbal environment than most other categories. Therefore, may provide a readily available basis for early gender stereotyping. (Cowan and Hoffman, 1986)

When examining the verbal environment through the Disney Princess model, it is important to look at the lyrics being repeatedly exposed to children through the films, pre-recorded audio dolls, music jewellery boxes and the Disney Princess CDs. This excerpt from the film 'Snow White' illustrates the stereotypical view of the Disney Princess as a passive being waiting for a man to transform her circumstances for her. 'Someday my prince will come...how thrilling that will be/when the prince of my dreams comes to me...someday when my dreams come true.' (Silverman, 2009) This gives the impression that finding a husband is the Princess's biggest dream.

Although it is important to look at the shared qualities of the princesses, it is also interesting to look at the characteristics of the villainesses in Disney. These characters seem to encompass all the qualities which women are taught not to possess. The villainesses in the Disney Princess films differ from their corresponding princesses in two main capacities – their active role in their own destinies and their overt sexualisation. Ursula's physical appearance contrasts significantly to Ariel's

slender beauty. Unlike the villainesses under Walt Disney himself, this new villainess, under the Disney Team, is hypersexualized with a strapless black dress which emphasizes her enormous breasts and curves. This is furthered by constant shakes, shimmies and more than nineteen references to body language and glamour in winning men's affection. Ursula's ugly, overweight figure is never desired by men. However, when Ursula transforms into a quite petite character on land, she succeeds in diverting Eric's attention away from Ariel. (Silverman, 2009)

This message seems to tell children that slender, beautiful passive women are desired by men. An independent or sexual woman is comedic and will never succeed. (Silverman, 2009) This message is echoed in Cinderella where the evil step-sisters throw themselves at men and actively pursue marrying the prince. This is demonstrated in their excessive planning of outfits for the ball and their aggressive (a masculine trait) behaviour with the prince's servants when trying on the glass slipper. These women are depicted as vain, unladylike and selfish and do not succeed in marrying into royalty. On the contrary, Cinderella's demure femininity wins her the prince's affection even though she never actively pursues his love. (Silverman, 2009)

According to the Disney Princess Brand, beauty equals femaleness. In Cinderella, we immediately notice that Cinderella is different to her step-sisters in terms of beauty. The differences which become apparent include '...grace, beauty, charm, cooking, and cleaning...' There is a clear message to young girls that these are the qualities a woman needs to possess in order to get married and therefore lives a happy and fulfilled life (O'Brien, cited in Tonn, 1998). By homogenizing the princesses' beauty ideals, one begins to wonder on what affect this may have on children's body image. All the princesses share certain characteristics, one of these being a perfect figure.

Beauty and the Beast portrays a disturbing message to children about the Beast's situation. Although the beast isn't actually violent with Belle, it always seems a possibility. (Maoi, 1998) She lives in fear of this man, who emotionally abuses her and locks her into her room. Disney's version of the old fable implies that women are responsible for controlling male anger and violence. (Ibid) It would be the people's

fault (especially the women) if the beast had not changed. It is seen as Belle's duty to turn the beast into a loving man. (Jeffords, 1995, cited in Silverman, 2009) Beauty and the Beast teaches children that if a woman is 'pretty and sweet enough' she can end the abuse (Maoi, 1998). Given the high rates of domestic violence in the Ireland, this message is frightening. Belle teaches children that it is acceptable for men to abuse women. Children may begin to think that if abuse is tolerated and met with love, the male can be transformed into a loving partner (Towbin et al., cited in Silverman, 2009).

This essay is an explored some of the messages portrayed to children through the Disney Princess franchise about gender roles. Gender socialisation processes was discussed in relation to the Disney Princess brand. This was achieved by looking at the reductionist model of female roles in the Disney Princess franchise. The feminine values which Disney portray were explored in relation to the feminine qualities of the Disney Princess, hidden messages behind the Disney lyrics, the sexualisation of the Disney villainesses and concealed messages about abuse of women in Disney. The theories behind gender learning were also put forward.

Finally, having looked at these points, I do not believe that the Disney Princess is a good role-model for young girls. These heroines are portrayed as passive 'damsels in distress' whose only goal is to find a man. In my opinion, a Disney female role-model could be conceptualised in promoting better gender roles in numerous ways. For example, why not show a female who is ambitious and successful in her career? Do loving relationships always have to be male-female? Why not portray a woman who works and a male who cares for the family? Or a happily ever after which doesn't end in marriage or pictures of motherhood? What about a woman who stands up for her rights, who challenges gender stereotypes or racial stereotypes? It appears that popular culture needs to be critiqued and analyzed jointly by teachers and young children. Children need to be provided with appropriate knowledge and information around issues of gender. This will allow them to develop their abilities to critically analyse social issues presented to them through popular culture, such as the Disney Princess model (Lee, 2008).

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