

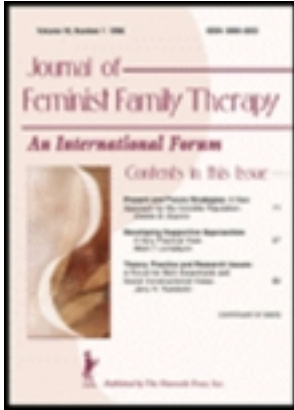
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Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954

Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Feminist Family Therapy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/wfft20>

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Available online: 08 Sep 2008

To cite this article: Mia Adessa Towbin, Shelley A. Haddock, Toni Schindler Zimmerman, Lori K. Lund & Litsa Renee Tanner (2004): Images of Gender, Race, Age, and Sexual Orientation in Disney Feature-Length Animated Films, *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, 15:4, 19-44

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J086v15n04_02

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ABSTRACT. The Disney Corporation is one of the largest media companies in the world. Disney's full-length animated films have been a popular form of children's entertainment for more than 60 years. No research to date has examined the portrayals of the organizing societal principles of gender, race, age, and sexual orientation across a wide sample of these films. This study examines the portrayal of these organizing principles in a sample of 26 full-length animated Disney films. Findings indicate that gender, racial, and cultural stereotypes have persisted over time in Disney films. Few examples of positive portrayals emerged, but were increasingly common in later films. Marginalized groups were portrayed negatively, rarely, or not at all. Clinical implications for therapists are provided. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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Journal of Feminist Family Therapy, Vol. 15(4) 2003
<http://www.haworthpress.com/web/JFFT>

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Digital Object Identifier: 10.1300/J086v15n04_02

KEYWORDS. Feminist research, culture, race, gender, sexual orientation, feminist family therapy, feminist couple therapy, thematic analysis, qualitative research

The purpose of this study was to analyze popular animated Disney films according to major organizing principles of society: gender, race, age, and sexual orientation. Children learn about these societal constructions from many sources, but media are powerful sources of learning. Given Disney's dominant position in children's media, it is important to examine the messages contained in these films related to gender, race, age, and sexual orientation. Such information is useful to professionals and parents who wish to teach children to critically analyze messages about these societal constructions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although Disney movies are originally released in theaters, they also are available on video. According to Lin (2001), once children own videos, they watch them repeatedly and with the same frequency as television. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation Report (1999), children watch an average of 2.5 to 3 hours of television per day, or nearly 20 hours per week. Preschool children spend more time watching videos than do adolescents (Bryant, 2001; Mares, 1998).

Children's development is influenced by many factors, including parents, teachers, and peers. Yet, as Swindler (1986) noted, the significance of the mass media cannot be overstated: "The accumulated experience [of media exposure] contributes to the cultivation of a child's values, beliefs, dreams, and expectations, which shape the adult identity a child will carry and modify through his or her life" (p. 311). Walma van der Molen and van der Voort (2000) found that while adults learn more readily from written information than from video or auditory sources, children learn most readily from video. Infants as young as one year of age replicate the emotions of people around them by observing their actions and reactions, even if these actions are only observed on television (Mumme, 2003).

The media's influence can be both positive and negative. Anderson (2001) found that high school students who had regularly watched educational television as children had higher grade point averages than those who did not. Durkin (1983) found that when children were shown

non-traditional depictions of gender on television, they were more likely to adopt less limiting views of gender norms.

Other research has found negative influences of media viewing for children. By the time a child is 18 years old, he or she will have seen 200,000 acts of violence and 40,000 murders on television, based on average viewing time (Huston, 1992). In a joint statement on the impact of entertainment violence on children (Congressional Public Health Summit, 2000), various medical and psychological associations cited over 1,000 studies that provide overwhelming evidence of a causal link between media violence and aggressive behavior for some children. Children who view violence can become frightened and may become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others (Smith & Donnerstein, 1998).

Portrayals of Gender, Race, Age, and Sexual Orientation in the Media

It is clear that media portrayals influence children's developing beliefs and values. Unfortunately, research shows that many stereotypes based on gender, race, age, and sexual orientation are portrayed in the media.

Gender portrayals. In a 30-year study of television, Signorielli and Bacue (1999) found that women are underrepresented as compared to men. Another researcher (Witt, 2000) found approximately two-thirds of characters on television are male, a percentage that has stayed consistent since the 1950s. Women are more likely to be portrayed as younger than are men (Signorielli, 1999), and as thin. Less than one in 10 are even slightly overweight (Fouts & Burggraf, 1999). Witt (2000) reported on several studies from the 1980s and 1990s:

Most females on nighttime television are young, attractive, thin and ornamental. Most female characters are either under 35 or over 50. Middle-aged women are rare. Females are consistently placed in situations where looks count more than brains and helpless and incompetent behaviors are expected. Men are twice as likely as women to be shown as competent and able to solve problems. Gender stereotypes abound on television, with women depicted as sex objects more frequently than men, and men portrayed as inept when handling children's needs. (p. 323)

Men are shown as rational, ambitious, smart, competitive, powerful, stable, violent, and tolerant. In movies and on TV, males are often characterized as being prone to violent behavior. Sixty-one percent of televi-

sion programs contain some violence; 44% of the time, perpetrators are attractive, and in 75% of the cases, they received no immediate punishment for the crime (Smith & Donnerstein, 1998). Men's violence against women in the media is commonplace, and is often portrayed as a form of "heterosexual-based eroticism," in which women are seduced by masculine (and abusive) behavior (hooks, 1994).

Portrayals of marginalized racial groups. Until recently, depictions of families on television have been mostly White and middle class (Holtzman, 2000). While more people of color are shown on television today, Nelson (1998) argued that diverse and accurate portrayals of these characters or cultures are rarely provided. Nelson (1998) argued that Black sitcoms "are not Black in that they exhibit an African American world view or a Black philosophy of life. Rather, they are Black because the performers are Black" (p. 80).

Between 1930 and 1945, Black actors and actresses were limited to roles of slaves or servants (Holtzman, 2000). After WWII, themes related to the exposure of racial discrimination began to emerge. In the 1970's, the stereotypes revolved around "blaxploitation" action films, which featured Black heroes winning over White "bad guys" (Holtzman). Currently, a trend exists where Black and White actors are shown working together in "buddy films." According to Artz (1998), the buddy film embodies a "new racism"; Blacks are shown in successful middle-class roles, while the conditions of poor and working class Blacks are ignored. Artz argued that this imagery works to construct perceptions of harmonious race relations.

Asians have been largely invisible in media. When they are present, the many Asian cultures that have many different traditions and lifestyles are "collapsed" into one group (Holtzman, 2000). Asian males tend to be portrayed as either the evil martial arts expert or the non-sexualized, non-masculine male. Asian females tend to be portrayed as attractive and submissive or as an overtly sexual exotic beauty. In an informal content analysis of Asian characters, Mahdzan and Ziegler (2001) found that Asian men are often depicted as not being ideal partners to women of their own racial group. In the media this is emphasized when movie producers pair Asian women with White men instead of Asian men. The message conveyed in the media is that Asian women prefer to be with White men. In further analysis, they found that while White men are often shown having a sexual relationship with an Asian woman, an Asian man is rarely portrayed as having an intimate relationship with a White woman. Mahdzan and Ziegler also found that in battles between Whites and Asians, White guys typically win. Consistently

they found that White men are portrayed as stronger and more intelligent than are Asian men.

According to Holtzman (2000), Latinos are underrepresented in main stream media, are often portrayed as simple, stereotyped, or negative. From 1955 to 1986, Latinos were represented in about two percent of television portrayals and this trend continued into the 1990s (Rodriguez, 1997). This low level of presence has remained, despite a nearly 100 percent increase in the Latino population in the United States (List, 1996). Early film images of Latinos show Mexican American bandits attacking White people. A later characterization was of the "Latin lover." Despite the stories of "hot romance," however, the Latin lover was never allowed to succeed in interracial love relationships. In more current films, Latino tend to be portrayed either as excessively violent or as rebels.

Portrayals of older adults. Signorielli and Bacue (1999) found that television celebrates youth, particularly in women. On television, women tend to be about four years younger than the men. The proportion of women categorized as young adults was greater during the 1990s than in the 1970s and 1980s. Other researchers have found that few women are portrayed who are over the age of 50 (Elasmar, Hasegawa, & Brain, 1999; Lauzen & Dozier, 1999). These researchers also found that negative messages are associated with aging, especially for women. Men around the age of 65 are portrayed as having jobs and are more likely to be categorized as middle-aged, but women of the same age are portrayed as elderly and they do not continue to work outside the home.

Portrayals of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. Gays and lesbians comprised 2% of characters in the 1999-2000 television season, and most were cast in minor roles (GLAAD, 1999). Although representations of gay characters are on the rise, these portrayals are almost exclusively White and male; lesbian and gay people of color remain largely invisible on television (GLAAD, 1999; Huntemann & Morgan, 2001).

In the early years of film, portrayals of same-gender sexuality were prohibited, and so gay characters were not affectionate or open, but rather expressed their sexuality through exaggerated opposite-gendered behavior. In the 1950s and 60s, there were some gay portrayals in films, but the gay characters were typically sad, lonely, and shown to die in the end (Gross, 2001). In a negative stereotype that continues in film making but that is not borne out statistically, gay characters have been disproportionately portrayed as psychotics and killers (Gross). However, Gross noted that some small strides have been made for gay portrayals in the 1990s.

THE DISNEY CORPORATION

The Disney Corporation is a major contributor to children's media. In 1999, it was worth nearly \$68,000 million (Wasko, 2001). The Disney Corporation owns a major television network, cable television networks, sports teams, production houses, and radio stations. Disney develops children's books, cartoons, computer software, and toys. Disney movies are one of the few forms of media that can be shared intergenerationally and are quite likely a part of most children's lives in the U.S.

Several researchers have examined the content of Disney animated films (Beres, 1999; Dundes, 2001; Gooding-Williams, 1995; Martin-Rodriguez, 2000; Wiersma, 2001). Some researchers have examined the gender messages contained in the films (Beres, 1999; Dundes, 2001; Wiersma, 2001). Others have looked at the cultural, racial, and ethnic aspects of Disney films (Gooding-Williams, 1995; Martin-Rodriguez, 2000; Palmer, 2000).

In an analysis of 16 animated Disney films, Wiersma (2001) found that gender images have not evolved to match the changes that have occurred in society, but remain stereotypic and similar to the gender portrayals beginning in the first animated Disney film in 1937. In her analysis of out-of-home employment, Wiersma found that male Disney characters held a diversity of jobs, including miner, governor, salesman, chef, doctor, lawyer, sailor, space ranger, and musician. She found 26 male job categories across 16 Disney films. Wiersma found only four women who had out-of-home employment; their jobs were actress, sheep tender, thief, and fairy. Wiersma also examined depictions of in-home labor, and found 24 examples of women performing domestic tasks. Wiersma found only four examples of men performing domestic labor—two of these were performed by the butler in *Aristocats*, and could also be considered as part of his job.

Dundes (2001) analyzed *Pocahontas* and found some conflicting messages about gender. In many ways Pocahontas is portrayed as a strong female character; however, at the end of the film, she follows a stereotypic female script. At the end of the film, Pocahontas says she is needed at home, and the movie has a sad feeling, giving the sense she is staying out of duty to her community. Dundes concluded that Pocahontas could have sent a stronger feminist message if it had a different ending. For instance, Dundes argued that if Pocahontas had been portrayed as staying at home out of choice—perhaps taking on a leadership role in the community—she would have appeared less role-constrained.

Beres (1999) not only found that gender stereotyped images are portrayed in the media, but that men's control over and abuse of women is shown as romanticized, as in *Beauty and the Beast*. She argued that, in some cases, women may interpret abuse as a sign that their partner cares for them and as a sign that they have a powerful partner. Craven (2002) reported that in rewriting *Beauty and the Beast* into an animated film, Disney "twists the [original] story from one of learning and understanding to one of falling in love, a very modern arrangement of romance stories."

This study is designed to identify prominent themes related to the societal and familial organizing principles of gender, race, age, and sexual orientation in Disney films. With this information, family therapists can help parents act as mediators, teaching children to critically analyze media messages. The findings of this study also can help family therapists in working with children to better understand the kinds of messages children may potentially be using to make sense of themselves and their world.

METHODS

Sample

A thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) was performed on a selected group of 26 feature-length Disney animated movies. Using purposive sampling, movies were selected that are most commonly watched by children today, and are among the more popular or most watched movies among multiple generations of Disney viewers (see Table 1 for the movies analyzed). The movies were chosen based on their inclusion in the category of Disney Classics, as well as recent movies released in theaters not yet deemed classics. From this group, additional selection criteria were used including movies released in theaters for the first time after 1990; movies reissued to theaters more than once; and movies rated in the top 10 animated films, top 25 movies, or top 10 musicals in Disney's "100 Years of Magic Survey." The movies selected represent those with either sustained or current popularity. Below, the movies will be referenced by easily recognized one-word abbreviations.

Data analysis was conducted in two phases. First, a template was developed in the form of codes or questions, to organize the indexing of material (Crabtree & Miller, 1992; Seidel & Kelle, 1995). These codes were organized into broad categories: How are boys/men portrayed? How are girls/women portrayed? How are members of marginalized

TABLE 1. Disney Animated Films Analyzed

Original Release	Movie Title
1937	Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs
1940	Pinocchio
1941	Dumbo
1942	Bambi
1950	Cinderella
1951	Alice in Wonderland
1953	Peter Pan
1955	Lady and the Tramp
1959	Sleeping Beauty
1961	101 Dalmatians
1963	The Sword in the Stone
1967	The Jungle Book
1973	Robin Hood
1981	The Fox and the Hound
1989	The Little Mermaid
1990	The Rescuers Down Under
1991	Beauty and the Beast
1992	Aladdin
1994	The Lion King
1995	Pocahontas
1996	The Hunchback of Notre Dame
1997	Hercules
1998	Mulan
1999	Tarzan
2000	Emperor's New Groove

cultures portrayed? How are the aged/elderly portrayed? How are gay/lesbian/bisexual people portrayed? Within these categories, codes, or questions, were asked: Which characters fit in this category? What are their characteristics? What is the nature of their role? What behaviors do they display?

In asking these questions, the coders focused on how the behaviors would likely appear to children who have yet to develop the higher level thinking that allows one (a) to differentiate between satire and realism and (b) to understand the influence of the social and historical context in which the film was created or based. In this way, the researchers could

identify overarching themes across movies—the messages that were repeated regardless of the historical and cultural eras in which the films were produced.

Relevant material was indexed into these codes. The movies were observed, and detailed information was recorded that was relevant to each code; this material included interactions, statements, song lyrics, and character illustrations. The coders independently coded two movies in their entirety to ensure consistency in the indexing process. Few discrepancies were apparent, but those that emerged were discussed in order to reach agreement on the process of future indexing. The remaining 24 movies were divided between the two coders, each indexing 12 movies.

In the second phase, we analyzed the indexed material inductively to develop themes for each code. This allowed us to derive meaning from the indexed material (Seidel & Kelle, 1995). Two coders completed both phases of the data analysis. After all of the movies were indexed, inductive analysis was used to identify common themes within each category. The two coders independently developed themes for each code. The coders discussed these themes with one another and a third member of the research team to develop overall themes. The third member of the research team had viewed all of the movies and served as a peer reviewer. While no formal inter-rater reliability was performed, this process allowed us to have confidence that the findings were consistent across members of the research team.

Several strategies have been established to enhance validity and trustworthiness of qualitative research findings (Creswell, 1998). To insure the integrity of qualitative research, Creswell (1998) advised investigators to utilize at least two of these strategies. We used four primary strategies: clarifying biases, peer review, creation of an audit trail, and performing counts. Prior to coding the movies, the coders clarified biases, perspectives, and orientations that we likely brought to our research. This process, commonly used by qualitative researchers, allows the researcher and consumer of research to be aware of the potential influence of their belief systems on the interpretation of findings. Both coders were graduate students in the Marriage and Family Therapy Program at Colorado State University. Both adhere to feminist principles in their academic and clinical work. In addition, both also have a strong interest in working with young children and their families, predominately through the use of play therapy.

Peer review was used throughout the coding process. The coders communicated periodically about the coding process and particular themes,

and discussed the emergent findings with a third member of the research team who was familiar with the movies.

An audit trail was developed so that themes can be traced back to discrete units of text. This process allowed for the re-examination of units of coded data to insure that generated data categories have remained true to the movies. Additionally, after themes were developed, the coders analyzed the data to develop counts on the numbers of movies that depicted the theme.

RESULTS

The results are organized according to themes that emerged in five categories: (a) What it means to be a boy/man, (b) What it means to be a girl/woman, (c) What it means to be from a particular culture, (d) What it means to display characteristics of the opposite sex, and (e) What it means to be an older person. Each movie has been given a one-word abbreviation to facilitate ease of reading.

Gender, Male

Five themes emerged related to what it means to be a boy/man: (a) Men primarily use physical means to express their emotions or show no emotions; (b) Men are not in control of their sexuality; (c) Men are naturally strong and heroic; (d) Men have non-domestic jobs; and (e) Overweight men have negative characteristics.

Men primarily use physical means to express their emotions. In 12 of the 26 movies (*Bambi, Cinderella, Peter, Lady, Sleeping, Aristocats, Fox, Oliver, Mermaid, Beauty, Hercules, and Mulan*), men and boys were more likely to respond to an emotional situation with physical, and in some cases, violent behavior than through the use of words. In *Cinderella*, the king yells and throws things around the room while talking to his son about why it is taking him so long to marry. Gaston in *Beauty* uses threats and violence in his quest to win Belle's attention.

One movie (*Robin*) portrayed men and boys as able to express emotion and resolve conflicts without physical force. Six movies displayed examples of males using both means of expression, physical and verbal. Two of these movies (*Tarzan* and *Emperor*) depicted males using more physical than verbal expression, and four movies (*Pinocchio, Jungle, Aladdin, and Hunchback*) showed males using more verbal than physical expression. For example, Aladdin uses his wits to outsmart his ene-

mies rather than using physical force, and Geppeto is portrayed as very nurturing.

In the same vein, six movies (*Dumbo*, *Bambi*, *Jungle*, *Aristocats*, *Oliver*, and *Mulan*) portrayed men as not expressing emotions or being encouraged to suppress emotion in traumatic situations. *Dumbo* is encouraged not to cry (“What would your mother think if she saw you crying like this?”). *Bambi*’s mother asks, “You’re not afraid, are you?” *Bambi* replies, “No.” In *Jungle*, Mogley claims not to be afraid of anything, and when Baloo gets a black eye, he says “Beautiful, ain’t it?” In *Mulan*, LiShang finds the dead body of his father and immediately jumps on his horse to head into battle.

Men are not in control of their sexuality. In 15 movies (*Pinocchio*, *Bambi*, *Cinderella*, *Alice*, *Lady*, *Dalmatians*, *Jungle*, *Fox*, *Oliver*, *Mermaid*, *Beauty*, *Aladdin*, *Hunchback*, *Hercules*, and *Mulan*), boys and men seemed to lose their senses in the presence of a beautiful woman. In *Cinderella*, all the men stop and stare as Cinderella walks into the ball. When Mogley sees a girl at the end of *Jungle*, he goes into a trancelike state and leaves his friends to follow the girl. *Hercules* cannot say no to Meg when she asks him to play hooky. When his teacher finds him, Meg says, “It’s my fault.” In *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, the princes fall in love with the women with very little more than glimpses of them. In *Hunchback*, Judge Frolo blames Esmerelda for being so irresistible that he cannot resist being tempted by her. He claims she is poisoning his mind.

Men are naturally strong and heroic. In 19 movies (*Pinocchio*, *Bambi*, *Cinderella*, *Peter*, *Sleeping*, *Dalmatians*, *Jungle*, *Aristocats*, *Robin*, *Pooh*, *Oliver*, *Mermaid*, *Beauty*, *Aladdin*, *Lion*, *Pocahontas*, *Hunchback*, *Mulan*, and *Tarzan*), men and boys are portrayed as rescuers who save the day. *Pinocchio* saves Geppeto from the belly of the whale. In *Lady*, Tramp rescues the babies from the rats. In many of these movies, the men are rescuing women. In *Lady*, Tramp also rescues Lady from the dangerous dogs. In *Aristocats*, O’Malley saves Marie and risks his life for Marie and the kittens. *Robin* fights to protect Marion. In *Lion*, Simba always walks in front of Nala; and *Aladdin* saves Jasmine.

In only two movies (*Hercules* and *Emperor*), did men not fit this heroic model. *Hercules* is not born naturally brave; he must be taught to be heroic. In *Emperor*, Pacha tries to save Kuzco from the jaguars, but fails. And, when Pacha tries to save them from the alligator, he succeeds, but by luck rather than skill.

Men have non-domestic jobs. In 17 of the movies, men were portrayed as having non-domestic jobs. In only three movies (*Pinocchio*, *Jungle*, and *Tarzan*) were men shown performing domestic tasks.

Overweight men are slow and unintelligent. In nine movies (*Cinderella*, *Alice*, *Peter*, *Dalmatians*, *Pooh*, *Aladdin*, *Lion*, *Hunchback*, and *Mulan*), overweight men were portrayed negatively as sloppy, unintelligent, and overly focused on eating.

GENDER, FEMALE

Four themes emerged related to what it means to be a girl/woman: (a) A woman's appearance is valued more than her intellect; (b) Women are helpless and in need of protection; (c) Women are domestic and likely to marry; (d) Overweight women are ugly, unpleasant, and unmarried.

A woman's appearance is valued more than her intellect. In 15 movies (*Dwarfs*, *Pinocchio*, *Cinderella*, *Alice*, *Peter*, *Lady*, *Sleeping*, *Dalmatians*, *Jungle*, *Aristocats*, *Robin*, *Oliver*, *Hunchback*, *Hercules*, and *Emperor*), a woman's value was determined by her appearance rather than her abilities or intellect. In *Sleeping*, the first gift given to the baby princess is beauty. In *Dwarfs*, the Queen's motivation to kill Snow White derives from the Queen's jealousy that Snow White is the fairest in the land. In *Mermaid*, Ariel wins the love of Prince Eric even after losing her voice.

Six movies (*Mermaid*, *Beauty*, *Aladdin*, *Pocahontas*, *Mulan* and *Tarzan*) showed examples of valuing women both by their appearance and by their intellect and accomplishments. In four of those movies (*Mermaid*, *Beauty*, *Aladdin*, and *Mulan*), there were more examples of women being valued for appearance than for intellect and accomplishments.

Beauty is a case in point: Belle loves to read and is portrayed as independent. Her beauty is celebrated ("It's no wonder her name means beauty—her looks have no parallel.") but her intellect ridiculed [The town sings, "I am afraid she's rather odd (for reading books and rejecting Gaston)—she's nothing like the rest of us."].

In two movies (*Pocahontas* and *Tarzan*), both appearance and intellect and accomplishment are valued, but accomplishment and intellect are valued more than appearance. Pocahontas is portrayed as wise and strong; she teaches the stranger from England to understand her culture and the importance of the environment. She is valued by her culture for her intellect when she helps both the Indians and the English avoid a war.

Women are helpless and in need of protection. This theme occurred in 11 movies (*Dwarfs, Bambi, Cinderella, Peter, Lady, Sleeping, Robin, Oliver, Mermaid, Lion, and Hercules*). For example, Tramp rescues Lady and the dog, Oliver, jumps onto a moving car to save Jenny in *Oliver*.

Ten movies (*Alice, Dalmatians, Aristocats, Fox, Beauty, Aladdin, Pocahontas, Hunchback, Mulan, and Tarzan*) showed women who were helpless and in need of protection as well as women who were heroic, independent, and adventurous. In seven of these 10, women were more likely to need help and protection from men than to be independent and adventurous (*Alice, Dalmatians, Aristocats, Beauty, Aladdin, Hunchback, and Tarzan*). In *Aladdin*, Jasmine regularly stands up to her father, but in the end is rescued by Aladdin. In *Aristocats*, Duchess leaves with the children when O'Malley will not make a commitment, but he consistently protects and rescues Duchess and Marie. In three movies (*Fox, Pocahontas, and Mulan*), there were portrayals of both women needing protection as well as heroic women, but with more portrayals of adventurous and independent women. In only one movie, *Jungle*, was a heroic woman portrayed (a female elephant stands up to her husband to save Mogley) without a portrayal of a woman also needing to be rescued. However, this may relate to the near absence of women in this movie.

Women are domestic and likely to marry. In 15 movies (*Dwarfs, Cinderella, Peter, Lady, Sleeping, Jungle, Aristocats, Robin, Fox, Mermaid, Beauty, Lion, Hunchback, Hercules, and Emperor*), women were portrayed in domestic roles. In only two movies (*Tarzan* and *Pocahontas*) was marriage not seen as the ultimate goal for women. In three movies (*Dalmatians, Aladdin* and *Mulan*), women were portrayed in both ways, but while both themes were present, the domestic role for women was the more dominant theme.

Overweight women are ugly, unpleasant and unmarried. Overweight women were portrayed in a negative light in four movies (*Cinderella, Alice, Robin, and Mermaid*). Ursula the sea witch is large and scary, and the stepmother in *Cinderella* is overweight and mean.

REPRESENTATIONS OF CULTURE

Five themes emerged related to race and culture: (a) negative representations of non-dominant cultures; (b) exaggerated class stereotypes; (c) only Western values and Christianity depicted; (d) characters who

share similar values should stay/be together; and (e) characters who share different values can be friends and create community together.

Non-dominant cultures are represented negatively. Negative representations of non-dominant cultures were present in 10 movies (*Pinochio, Dumbo, Alice, Peter, Lady, Dalmatians, Aristocats, Robin, Oliver, and Aladdin*). In *Dumbo*, the crows appear to have African American voices; they depict stereotypically negative characteristics often associated with racist depictions African Americans, such as being poor, unintelligent, and naïve. Also in *Dumbo*, there are images related to slavery, with Black workers doing manual labor while a White man is in charge. They sing, "We work all day, we work all night, we have no life to read and write, we're happy . . . we don't know when we get our pay, and when we do, we throw our money away. . .". In *Peter*, Peter Pan refers to the indigenous tribe as "red skins"; he describes them as being cunning, but not intelligent. In *Aladdin*, the Arabs are portrayed as dirty, cheap, and thieving. The caterpillar in *Alice* has stereotypical Middle Eastern characteristics, and is portrayed as smoking, lazy, and short-tempered. In *Lady*, the Siamese cats are portrayed with slanted eyes and buckteeth; they are dangerous and speak with poor grammar and accents. In *Oliver*, Tito, a Chihuahua, is portrayed as a Hispanic character that fights, chases women, and hotwires cars.

In four movies (*Pocahontas, Hunchback, Lion, and Mulan*), both positive and negative portrayals of other cultures were present, with more positive portrayals. For example, in *Hunchback*, the gypsies are described as poor, evil, and thieves, but in the end Esmerelda breaks the stereotypes about gypsies and talks about the prejudiced way in which they are treated. Although the hyenas in *Lion* receive a negative portrayal, there is also the message that different cultures can get along. For example, Rafiki and Mufasa are different animals but good friends.

In three movies (*Lion, Pocahontas, and Hunchback*), non-dominant cultures are accurately represented. Pocahontas's village is presented in a natural setting, with Native American characterizations that are respectful. In *Lion*, the setting is Africa, and the movie depicts some African culture without relying on stereotypes.

One movie (*Mulan*) has both exaggerated and accurate portrayals of the same culture. For example, Chi Fu is given exaggerated Chinese features, with a long mustache, slanted eyes, and bad teeth. However, the movie is set in China, and shows Chinese characters, dress, architecture, and names in a realistic way.

Class stereotypes are exaggerated. Exaggerated stereotypes of class were evident in 13 movies (*Pinocchio, Dumbo, Alice, Lady, Dalma-*

tians, Aristocats, Pooh, Oliver, Beauty, Aladdin, Lion, Hunchback, and Emperor). In *Lion*, the hyenas are portrayed as lower class, poor, and hungry. They complain that the lions have all of the power in their community. The hyenas are referred to as stupid. In *Oliver*, the street dogs are thieves, cons, and ruffians. In *Beauty*, the animated housewares sing, "Life is unnerving for a servant that's not serving," which implies that the poor enjoy serving the rich.

Only Western values and Christianity are depicted. In 10 movies (*Dwarfs, Pinocchio, Cinderella, Peter, Lady, Sleeping, Dalmatians, Robin, Mermaid, and Hunchback*), only dominant cultural themes were portrayed. Characters were nearly all White, and the expectation was that all people are or should be like this. In four movies (*Lion, Pocahontas, Hercules, and Mulan*), non-Western beliefs were represented. In *Pocahontas*, Native American spirituality is explored; people's connection to the natural world is celebrated, and nature is portrayed with wisdom. In *Lion*, Rafiki is a medicine man who teaches Simba to look to his ancestors for guidance. In *Mulan*, Buddhist temples are shown, and the characters pray to their ancestors.

Characters who share similar values should stay/be together. In eight movies (*Lady, Sleeping, Jungle, Mermaid, Beauty, Aladdin, Pocahontas, and Hercules*), a theme emerged that characters must share the same values in order to get along. Pocahontas stays with her family rather than go to England with John Smith. Hercules must choose to be a mortal on earth or a god on Olympus—he can't be both.

Characters who have different values can stay together/be friends. In five movies (*Pooh, Oliver, Lion, Hunchback, and Tarzan*), a theme emerged that different types of characters can get along and create community. In *Hunchback*, Esmerelda and Phoebus are an interracial couple. In *Oliver*, all the dogs in the group have different "ethnicities" and they have a cat in their circle of friends. Tarzan is raised and loved by a gorilla family.

In one movie (*Fox*), both of these themes were apparent; with more emphasis on the theme that similar characters belong together. In this film, a dog and a fox grow to be friends as pups. Later, however, they must end their friendship, because their lives are so different.

Absence of Gay Characters—Portrayals of Opposite-Gender Behavior

No same-sex relationships are portrayed in any of the movies. Given the stereotype in United States culture that gay men and lesbian women have opposite gender behavior, such a theme was examined. Five mov-

ies depicted negative portrayals of men with traditionally feminine traits (*Peter, Robin, Aladdin, Lion, and Pocahontas*). In these movies, the “bad guys” or their sidekicks were shown as having feminine traits. In *Robin*, Prince John is portrayed in a stereotypically effeminate way; he has a high pitched laugh, a limp wrist, wears a lot of jewelry, and is too small to fit into his robe or throne. In *Peter*, Captain Hook’s sidekick, Sween, has many stereotypically feminine traits and displays nurturing behavior toward Hook and the pirates. He is ridiculed and shown singing and dancing by himself.

In six movies (*Pinocchio, Peter, Aladdin, Hunchback, Tarzan, and Emperor*), however, men display what are traditionally thought to be feminine traits without having negative portrayals: Peter Pan is small and sprightly, Aladdin is not overly muscular, and although Tarzan fits into the traditional male appearance role, he has the ability to express his emotions and pursue self-examination. In these cases, men are not disparaged for having non-traditional male traits.

In three movies (*Beauty, Mulan, and Emperor*), same-sex affection between men is considered disgusting and receives ridicule. In *Beauty*, after winning a battle, a male candle kisses a male clock on both cheeks, and the clock reacts with disgust. Mulan, when she is posing as a male soldier, slaps one of the other male soldiers on the behind. This makes him angry, and he calls Mulan “Chicken Boy.” In *Emperor*, Kuzco passes out, but wakes up just before Pacha is about to give him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Both jump up, spit, and make faces of disgust and turn away from each other.

One movie (*Aladdin*) displayed both positive and negative portrayals of same-sex affection. Only *Lion* showed males being affectionate with one another as acceptable, as portrayed in the relationship between the warthog, Timon and the meercat, Pumbaa.

In two movies (*Mulan and Tarzan*), women act and dress like boys. Although certain characters appear outraged when *Mulan* is revealed to be a woman (Chi Fu says, “I knew there was something wrong with you! A woman!”) He throws her down and says, “Traacherous snake!”) with time, Mulan is accepted and celebrated by her community. In *Tarzan*, Terk is a female who displayed many traditionally male characteristics, but did not receive any negative messages. She wrestles Tarzan and wins and is the leader of her gorilla group.

Portrayal of Older Characters

Although Disney films typically revolve around youthful plotlines, 14 movies portrayed characters who were older (*Pinocchio, Cinderella,*

Lady, Dalmatians, Beauty, Aladdin, Pooh, Fox, Hunchback, Mulan, Dwarfs, Emperor, Lion, and Pocahontas). In six films (*Pinocchio, Cinderella, Lady, Dalmatians, Beauty, and Aladdin*), older characters were portrayed as forgetful and stupid. In *Beauty*, Belle's older father lost his way in the woods and became flustered easily. In four of the films (*Pooh, Fox, Hunchback, and Mulan*), older characters were portrayed as crotchety, grumpy, and mean. Rabbit in *Pooh* is always short of temper and the old female gargoyle in *Hunchback* is always yelling at people. In two movies (*Dwarfs and Emperor*), old women are portrayed as ugly and mean.

In only three movies (*Lion, Pocahontas, and Mulan*) were older characters portrayed positively. Rafiki, the baboon in *Lion*, provides guidance to young Simba; Grandmother Willow provides guidance to Pocahontas.

DISCUSSION

In this qualitative analysis of 26 feature-length Disney films, a number of themes emerged about gender, race/ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation. Although some positive changes have occurred in Disney films over time, many of the messages remain the same or are mixed. In this section, we discuss the results of this study by describing "the good news," "the same news," and "the mixed news."

The Same News

Overall, these research findings are consistent with what others have found when studying Disney animated films. Gender stereotypes continue to be portrayed, and non-dominant groups are portrayed negatively, marginalized, or not portrayed at all.

Gender. Although gender messages in Disney movies have become less obviously prescriptive, the movies continue to portray traditionally limiting images of gender. Men are depicted as physically aggressive, non-expressive, and as heroic saviors, particularly of women. Women are portrayed as beautiful, dependent on men, and engaged in domestic responsibilities. While female characters in some recent movies are portrayed as strong initially, in the end, they often require rescue from even stronger male characters. In many films, both human and animal female characters are portrayed as overly sexual; they typically have unnatu-

rally small waists, large breasts, big eyes, and batting eyelashes (Chyng, 2001).

Unhealthy portrayals of male and female sexuality abound in Disney. In *Beauty*, the “male” candlestick woos the “female” broom; as she says, “No, no, no,” he says, “Yes, yes, yes.” This reinforces a societal assumption that when women say no, they really mean yes; or worse, that her refusal is simply irrelevant (Media Education Foundation, 2001). In *Aladdin*, a scene portrays Jasmine distracting the Sultan by becoming a seductress. This teaches children that one way for a woman to get what she wants from a man is to manipulate him with her sexuality. Perhaps the most insidious message about sexuality is portrayed in *Beauty*. The Beast imprisons Belle, separates her from her father, rages at her repeatedly, and refuses to feed her unless she eats with him. Yet, eventually, Belle’s love transforms the Beast into a prince. Given the prevalence of domestic violence in the United States, this message is alarming. From *Beauty*, children learn that it is acceptable for men to abuse women. They learn that if women tolerate the abuse and continue to love him despite his abuse, she will eventually be able to change him into a loving partner.

Race and culture. Disney films also were replete with negative and stereotypic images of marginalized racial groups. Characters of color were portrayed as villainous or scary in many movies. The crows in *Dumbo* and the apes in *Jungle* appear to be based on racist notions of African Americans. In *Jungle*, the apes sing with African American voices to a Caucasian boy, “I want to be a man. I want to walk like you, talk like you. I want to be like you.” The Media Education Foundation (2001) argued that these lyrics indicate that Blacks and Whites are not equal, and that Blacks want to be like Whites.

Even 40 years after the production of *Jungle*, *Lion*’s portrayal of the hyenas mimics stereotypes of inner-city minorities; they are portrayed as sinister and thieving, and they often complain that the lions maintain the power in their society. *Tarzan*, a film produced in 1999, makes strides in its portrayal of a male character who has an emotional life; however, this film also contains racist overtones. Tarzan, a White man, is shown in control of African jungles, without even one portrayal of a Black character.

The Good News

The good news is that positive portrayals can be found, particularly in newer films.

Gender. Female characters in several of the more recent films are shown as heroic and courageous. Mulan portrayed a girl who refused to

fit into a stereotypical female role; instead, she disguises herself as a man and goes to war in place of her father. She proves to be a sturdy soldier and a trustworthy companion. In fact, she is primarily responsible for ending the war. Although she is initially disparaged when her true gender is revealed, her country eventually celebrates her. In one powerful scene, a large crowd bows down before her in gratitude and respect. Pocahontas also is depicted as a strong and healthy female character. She does not allow her father to dictate whom she will marry. She is portrayed as active and competent and she stands by her own beliefs. For instance, she values living as one with the environment and accepting people from cultures different from her own.

A few male characters are shown as having an inner emotional life. *Robin Hood* portrays men who are able to settle disagreements without violence. In a progressive and touching scene, Tarzan describes his feelings of love for his adoptive ape mother. Also in this movie, Tarzan is shown falling in love with Jane slowly over time, rather than instantly upon seeing her beauty, as is most likely the case in animated Disney films (Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman, & Lund, 2003).

Race and culture. Newer Disney films have incorporated some positive portrayals of non-Western cultures. In *Mulan*, Asian culture is mostly presented in a realistic and positive manner, although some negative stereotypic attributes are given to the “bad guys.” *Mulan* is the first animated Disney film to attempt to accurately depict Asian culture; older films rely on negative stereotypes to portray Asians, such as the sinister Siamese cats in *Lady*, and the farcical drummer in *Aristocats*. *Pocahontas* depicts Native Americans positively in highlighting these cultures’ respectful relationship with nature. This film contrasts this reverence for nature with the English’s destructive force on the earth. This may be the first negative portrayal of Euro-American culture in Disney films. In *Hunchback*, the Gypsies first are portrayed as dirty thieves, but at the end of the film, Esmerelda defends them and challenges racist beliefs about them. In movies, such as *Pooh*, *Lion*, *Oliver*, and *Hunchback*, a primary message is that despite differences in appearance, values, and characteristics, people can create a community together.

The Mixed News

In many Disney movies, both positive and limiting messages about gender and race/culture are portrayed.

Gender. This analysis revealed that mixed messages about gender are often presented in Disney films. Acts of bravery or independence on the

part of a female character are often followed by a “twist” in the plot that places her in a one-down position to a male. In *Beauty*, Belle exhibited relatively non-traditional gender behaviors, such as a love of reading and adventure, and she is not attracted to Gaston, the handsome and powerful suitor. When the Beast captures her father, Belle bravely trades places with him so that he may be free. On the other hand, Belle needs someone to rescue her at the end of the movie. She also falls in love and marries the Beast, despite his abusive behavior.

Mermaid provides another example of a film in which there are mixed gender messages. In some cases, the little mermaid is shown as a strong and independent character; for instance, she disobeys her domineering father in her quest to walk on land and meet the prince with whom she believes she has fallen in love. She swims away from home and faces many scary creatures to visit a sea witch who can help her walk on land so she can find the prince. But to win a relationship, she must sacrifice her very voice. The symbolism here is powerful. To win the love of the prince, she must forfeit her thoughts and intellect, her independence and identify; she must rely solely on her body to win his favor. Although this story was first written by Hans Christian Andersen, it is an apt metaphor for many Disney heroines: No one listens to their words.

In the character of Pocahontas there are similar contradictory messages about female strength. In some ways, Pocahontas was a strong female character who stood up to her father, fell in love with someone from outside of her culture, taught her lover lessons about the environment, and ultimately made the choice to stay with her family and community rather than leave with this man. In other ways, Pocahontas fell into a traditional female script. She fell in love, and while it was not at first sight, this love occurred in one day’s time and without even speaking the same language as the man, John Smith.

Race and culture. Mixed messages about culture and race also occur in Disney films. In *Hunchback*, the gypsies are denigrated for being dirty thieves. In the end, however, Esmerelda defends the Gypsies, redeeming their character. In *Mulan*, China is depicted in a visually realistic way, and the likable characters have non-exaggerated Asian facial features. However, within the same film, Chi Fu, who is power hungry and rude, has stereotypically exaggerated Asian facial features.

As a whole, Disney movies contain mixed messages about how people from various cultures relate. Six of the films show that people from various cultures can create community (e.g., the apes and humans in *Tarzan*, and the various animals in *Pooh* and *Oliver*), while nine of the movies show that only characters that are similar can be friends. In *Lion*,

there are a number of examples of different species of animals living in harmony—Mufasa and Rafiki, Timon, Pumbaa, and Simba. Despite this positive message, the hyenas are shown as marginalized and ostracized. What is the message here? Perhaps it is that tolerance between some groups is acceptable, but not between all groups. In *Fox*, the young fox and young dog are friends—but when they grow up, they realize that their worlds are too different for them to be friends. Pocahontas must decide between going to England with John Smith or staying with her community; she chooses to stay home; Hercules must decide between being immortal or human, but cannot be both.

Rewriting history, culture. Perhaps one of the most disturbing facets of Disney movies is the way in which stories are reinterpreted. This is disturbing in two primary ways. First, Disney animated films often retell stories to fit into the dominant paradigm of our society, regardless of the story's original moral. Second, on several occasions, Disney has rewritten history in inaccurate ways.

In *Mermaid*, the original story takes place in a largely matriarchal society; however, in the Disney version, men hold the power (Wasko, 2001). Additionally, in the original fairy tale, the mermaid does give up her voice to walk on land, but the prince chooses not to marry her. He says many times that he wishes she could speak to him. But being unable to speak had a cost—the prince marries another woman. Only in the Disney version can body language and batting eyes win the prince's love; the happily-ever-after version is pure Disney contrivance. In *Mulan*, the film begins with a matchmaker looking over Mulan and criticizing her appearance. Historically, there was no such behavior in China; the culture is represented as far more sexist and oppressive than it actually was.

In *Pocahontas*, history is rewritten as to be unrecognizable (Chyng, 2001). There was an Indian named Pocahontas who saved an Englishman, named John Smith, from being killed. The similarities between the Disney movie and reality end there. In reality, Pocahontas was a child when she met John Smith and there was no romance between them. Also, the movie depicts the English and Indians as equals in war. Pocahontas prevents the war and the English return to England. In reality, the Europeans stayed in America, and in a massive act of genocide, killed almost all of the Indians. In the movie, Pocahontas must decide between leaving with John Smith to go to England or staying with her community. In reality, Pocahontas grew up and married an Englishman; she went to England where she soon caught an illness and died.

Ageism and homophobia. Although the researcher examined content related to age and sexual orientation, few themes emerged, preventing meaningful conclusions from being drawn. In three films, older characters were portrayed as wise characters: The mother willow in *Pocahontas*, Rafiki the baboon in *Lion* and one character in *Mulan*.

No portrayals of same-sex relationships were evident in any of the films studied. This omission continues to reinforce the invisibility of homosexuality in society. Disparaging images of same-sex contact outweighed any images of positive same-sex contact.

CLINICAL APPLICATIONS

As media steadily becomes more a part of daily life, therapists will play an important role in helping parents negotiate its use by children. Therapists can coach parents to assist children in understanding and recognizing the embedded gender, racial, and cultural stereotypes in media. It is important for therapists to empower parents to critically analyze media consumed by their children. Without parental assistance in interpretation, children can become passive recipients to these repeated messages, some of which, if viewed repeatedly, may become internalized beliefs.

Coaching parents to mediate children's media viewing. As many adults and children are familiar with Disney films, therapists can encourage parents to use these films as a springboard for family discussion. If parents watch the movies with their children and ask questions before, during, and after, parents can begin to increase their children's media literacy, and increase their understanding of the power of media and the messages that it does and does not send. By asking children questions, such as—What messages are being sent to girls and boys? Why are the characters dressed like that? Is there a difference in how the women and men dress?—children can become critical viewers at a young age, with the hope that they will be less influenced by media and its messages as they mature into adolescence and adulthood.

In some cases, Disney movies might be helpful in creating a dialogue that can include children in the therapy process. Because most children are familiar with Disney, it can be a way to discuss a problem from a common area of understanding. For example, a therapist could ask if there is a character that has a similar issue in their life. For example, many Disney characters have only one parent, and a child with only one parent might relate to Bambi, Cinderella, Pocahontas, or Mulan. This

can lead to a discussion about potentially sensitive subjects with a non-threatening, child-friendly approach.

Disney films as a basis for narrative therapy. A therapist might also use Disney movies as a source for narrative therapy. Because most people are familiar with the story lines, and because they often follow a predictable, traditional pattern, therapist can try to help their clients see different outcomes by rewriting the stories. For example, in a case where a woman was feeling pressure to conform to societal expectations, the therapist and client together could rewrite *Cinderella*, perhaps transforming her into a strong character who confronted her stepmother about her abusive behavior and who waited six months before marrying the prince, just to make sure they had a good relationship first.

Using Disney to discuss racism, sexism, and homophobia. When therapists are working with all families, and in particular with families from a non-Euro-American background, they must assume that issues of prejudice in our society are something that will affect the family on a daily basis. No matter what the presenting problem might be, the family's circumstance must be understood within the cultural context of our society and with awareness of prejudice. According to McGoldrick (2003), "All therapists must work actively to undo racism to eradicate this pernicious force in our society." In this context, Disney movies can serve as an example of society in microcosm: there are embedded messages of racism in many of the movies. Learning to find them and bringing the messages into the open can be educational and empowering for children. It can also build a bridge between cultures, especially if the therapist's cultural background is different from that of their client.

With children, learning to recognize instances of embedded racism, sexism, homophobia, and ageism can raise awareness—both for children from Euro-American backgrounds as well as for those from less dominant cultures in our society. Learning to recognize these messages, disguised though they might be inside a bird or a dragon or a dog—can be a useful tool in stripping them of their power to be transmitted to yet another generation.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This is a descriptive study; it only reports common themes related to gender, race, class age, and sexual orientation depicted in Disney movies. Although Disney films often employ satire to condemn stereotypes

or bigotry and are undoubtedly influenced by the societal influences of the times in which they were made, this study examines the messages shown, without consideration of historical context. For example, although the crows in *Dumbo* were intended to be sardonic, some researchers have perceived them as perpetuating stereotypes about African Americans (Chyng, 2001). The design of this study does not allow us to determine what meanings children derive from these movies or the influence that these meanings have, if any, on their beliefs, values, and behaviors. It would be beneficial to conduct future research that interviewed children individually or in focus groups to determine the meaning they derive from these movies. Additionally, future research that determines the influence of media messages on children's understanding of these organizing principles would be helpful. Another area of future research could include analyses of the newer animated Disney films, such as *Finding Nemo*, *Lilo and Stitch* and *Brother Bear*. In these recent films, it appears that Disney is making strides in addressing gender, race, and class stereotypes.

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SUBMITTED: 08/25/03

REVISED: 11/15/03

ACCEPTED: 01/25/04