

Representations of Gender in Disney Full-Length Animated Features Over Time

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Abstract

Disney has been making full-length animated feature films since 1937. These films have often studied been studied because they are a major source of entertainment for many children and potentially could have an impact on their social, emotional and mental development. Previous studies have focused on gender role messages from the films, usually finding that they contain stereotypical messages that negatively characterize females (e.g., female characters who are

overly passive). These previous studies have tended to generalize portrayals over the entire seventy year history of Disney films and have not looked at how those influential messages have changed over time (even though gender norms have changed over time). Twenty-one of the fifty “Walt Disney Animated Classics” films were coded for the “rising action” and the conclusion of the films, focusing on male and female heroes and villains. The primary hypothesis was that stereotypical gender behaviors of both male and female heroes would decrease over time, and that villains’ stereotypical behaviors would increase. What was identified instead was a movement of both genders of hero towards masculinity over time. Villains did not change.

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Introduction

There are stereotypical behaviors normally associated with either gender. Women tend to be considered passive, overemotional, and illogical, just to name a few characteristics (I. Broverman, Vogel, D. Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1972). This image is one that modern feminism attempts to combat because of the negative view of women it promotes to men and the negative self-image it creates in women (hooks, 2000). Stereotypical male behaviors tend

to be more highly valued than female ones (McKee & Sherriffs, 1957), but men can also be attributed with negative behaviors. Violence, stubbornness, and a lack of self-control when related to anger or sexual urges are often associated with men, and the stereotypes can be linked to male children acting violently (Watson, 2007).

These messages are often presented to children through the media they consume, such as stories or cartoons, and they pay attention to them and form their worldviews using them. When surveying 80 children about their tendency towards gender stereotyped toys or activities, McGhee found that those classified as heavy television watchers were more stereotypical in their preferences (1975). In her readings of Disney's Cinderella Storybook to girls around the age of six, Baker-Sperry found that they are very aware of the value of beauty and marriage for women, and related Cinderella and the step-sisters over and over to themselves, comparing their deeds and their looks to the characters' (2007).

Disney and Gender Roles

It could be argued that Disney is the most-well known company in the world. Disney is the world's largest media conglomerate by market value (Siklos, 2009) and "Hollywood's biggest single movie producer" (Maney 1995: 163-164). In a survey Disney itself conducted, they found that 97% of children aged 2-11 that they surveyed were familiar with Cinderella. Of the 14 characters they asked about, the lowest familiarity rating was given to Eeyore, who still was recognized by 86% of the children surveyed (Bell & Winig, 2009).

With the pervasiveness of Disney in our culture, the films the company produces have come under scrutiny time and time again. Most often, Disney films are found wanting in their portrayal of gender roles. Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, and Tanner's results for women in Disney movies is grim: "(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” (2003: 30). However, they made next to no distinction of a character’s behavior related to their position in the story. For example, Gaston, the villain of “Beauty and the Beast,” is given the same analysis that Aladdin, the hero of the story by the same name, receives. The authors note that Aladdin gets by on his wits while Gaston is very aggressive and physical, but take both character depictions as the presented male gender roles of their respective movies, ignoring that the Beast, the main male hero of “Beauty and the Beast,” undergoes an important character development from very physical and aggressive to verbal and emotional within the story (28-29).

Disney seems to also fail on basic numeric representations of gender: in an analysis of the 19 most recent and successful Disney movies at the time, Faherty found that 63% of the 334 characters represented were male, and only 28% were female, with 9% of the characters being unable to be visually categorized into a gender (2001).

Wiersma’s analysis of Disney films using “physical appearance, personality traits, in-home labor, out of home employment, and societal and familial power” as criteria to code gender content found similar results as the other studies; patriarchal constructs of society with traditional gender roles (1999: 45-51).

These analyses of gender roles all seem to be saying one thing: Disney presents poor ones for girls. What none of these studies do, however, is focus on the changing gender roles over time, instead taking all of the films as a lump representation of gender roles. Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs, the first Disney Animated Feature, came out in 1937, while the latest film, Winnie the Pooh, came out in July 2011. Seventy-four years is a significant amount of time, and this fact seems to be largely ignored by the analyses done beforehand. Since 1937, there have been many

changes in the way women and men are expected to act. Women entering the workforce, two waves of feminism, and abortion and birth control rights separate our time and Snow White's. Even the films themselves have been under feminist critiques quite often. Observing the changes that the company has made over time will contextualize the gender messages of its current films.

Structure of Storytelling

Gustav Freytag developed the widely accepted literary theory of the pyramid structure of drama. He wrote his theory based on plays, but it has been adapted over the years to explain story structure in all of its forms. The pyramid structure he described has been defined as Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, and Dénouement. In the climax the protagonist overcomes or is overcome by the antagonist, and there is often some inner change experienced by the protagonist before he or she moves on to the Dénouement, or Conclusion (1894).

Thus, a difference can be expected in the protagonist when comparing their behavior at the beginning of the film to that of what comes after the climax of the film. Because of the change in behavior during the climax, the rising action would currently give storytellers the opportunity to play with old gender stereotypes before having the "proper" change occur in the character and demonstrate a less-stereotyped character after the climax. Similarly, since these old stereotypes are seen more negatively now, villains' behaviors could be stereotyped to reflect their place on the wrong side of the story.

Hypotheses

The primary hypothesis is that the stereotypical gender behaviors of both male and female heroes will remain consistently high in the rising action over time, while in the conclusion the stereotypical behaviors will decrease over time. I also believed that male and

female villains' behaviors will become more stereotypical over time in both the rising action and the conclusion.

Methods

Every other movie in the "Walt Disney Animated Classics" canon (with "package films" like *Fantasia* removed to keep focus on full-length stories) was be watched in order of release. This means that 21 films were be watched. See Appendix A for a full list of the movies.

Male and female main characters and villains were identified for the coders prior to viewing. The film and behaviors were coded for the rising action (the action leading up to the climax) and the conclusion (the actions after the climax) of the film. Coding was formatted to ten dichotomous descriptive words associated as stereotypical female and male behaviors, taken from Broverman et al. (1972.) The words are on a seven-point Likert scale, with stereotypical female behaviors on the low end of the scale and stereotypical male behaviors on the high end. The paired behaviors are: Strong/Weak, Rough/Gentle, Independent/Dependent, Active/Passive, Unemotional/Emotional, Objective/Subjective, Competitive/Uncompetitive, Logical/Illogical, Dominant/Submissive, and Loud/Quiet. See Appendix B for the Coding Manual, which contains the definitions used for all the behaviors. See Appendix C for a sample Coding Worksheet. For 25% of the films, a second coder was used to gain an inter-rater reliability measure for the coding.

The films were split into two temporal categories for analysis, "Classic," and "Modern." This split was right in the middle of the data of the films, between "Oliver & Company," and "Beauty and the Beast," which means it fits within Disney's narrative of its company history as well, with the first of the "Disney Renaissance" films being "The Little Mermaid," the film right between the two.

Results

The inter-rater reliability of the gender behavior coding was calculated with correlations between all twenty dependent variables. Their range was .58 to .92, with a mean of .80. Two of the behaviors' correlations were below .7: Logical/Illogical and Objective/Subjective. They were excluded from analysis.

First, a little about the nature of the data: there were 21 films coded. All 21 films had at least a male hero, 18 times he was accompanied by a female hero. The villains varied in gender and usually worked alone. Villains did not often survive the climax of the films: only 2 of the 19 villains were seen in the conclusion of a film, "Emperor's New Groove" shows Yzma and Kronk reformed (more or less) and working with the heroes at the end.

A measure of overall gender behaviors was created combining the 8 behavioral characteristics which were found to have adequate reliability. This procedure was applied to both the Rising Action (Cronbach's Alpha = .8910) and the Conclusion (alpha of .84239).

Independent t-tests were conducted comparing the new Rising Action and Conclusion measures to Time Period, Gender, and Character Type. There were no significant results for Gender, but over time there is a trend towards masculinity, and villains rate more masculine than heroes (see Fig. 1 for results).

Variable	Factor	Mean	St.D	N	t	df	P-value
Rising Action*	Classic	4.03	1.83	2	3.60	38.63	<.001
	Moder	2.69	0.81	2			

Conclusion *	n	3	5	9			
	Classic	4.83	1.32	1	4.07	28.28	<.00
Rising Action	n	5	6	9	6	4	1
	Moder	3.42	0.78	2			
Conclusion	Female	3.60	1.65	2	0.97	48.74	.333
	Male	3.18	1.49	3			
Rising Action*	Female	4.15	1.44	1	0.37	34.14	.713
	Male	4.00	1.14	2			
Conclusion	Hero	3.91	1.50	3	5.00	50.79	<.00
	Villain	2.25	0.99	1			
			3	9			

Figure 1. Independent t-tests of Rising Action, Conclusion variables. Significant variables are starred.

Independent t-tests were also done on the 10 behaviors individually. The results that were significant were that females are less competitive than males and much quieter than males (See Fig. 2).

Variable	Factor	Mean	St.D	N	t	df	P-value
Competitive/Uncompetitive* (Rising Action)	Female	3.92	1.84	2	2.22	52.50	.030
	Male	2.81	1.89	3			

Loud/Quiet * (Rising Action)	Female	8	4	3	2.70	43.56	.009
		4.12	2.33	2			
	Male	2.60	1.78	3	6	4	3
		6	4	3			

Figure 2. Independent t-tests of significant individual dependent variables.

One 2

x 3 ANOVA and three 2 x 2 ANOVAs were conducted comparing the Rising Action and Conclusion variables with Time Period, Gender, and Character Type. There was no significant interaction between all three, but there was a significant interaction between Time Period and Character Type, $F(1,7)= 10.666, p=.002$. Heroes changed a lot over time, seeing about a three point drop on the scale (bringing them from the feminine side of the scale, above 4, to the masculine side), while villains barely changed at all (See Fig. 3).

Discussion

The hypothesis was only partially supported. Instead of a drift towards less stereotypical behaviors over time, there is a drift of both genders of heroes towards masculinity. This drift is interesting when you consider that Disney's villains were more masculine than its heroes.

If the movies' handling of gender reflects our own society's thoughts on gender, what does an overall drift towards masculinity say about the value we put on femininity? Disney movies, as pointed out

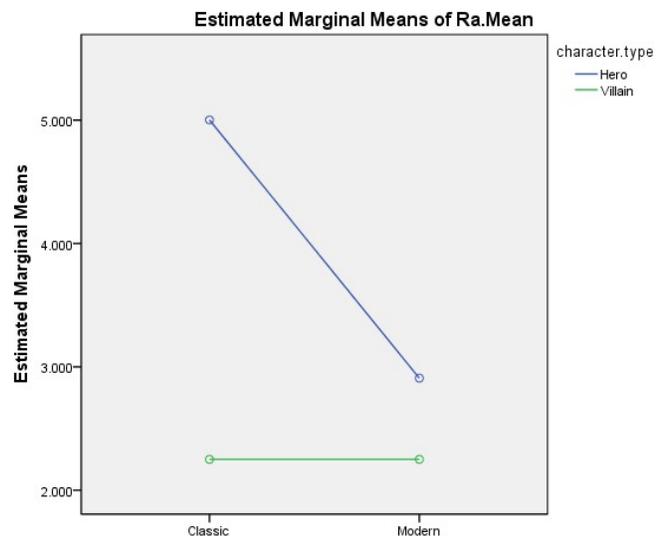


Figure 3. Plot of means of Classic and Modern films, separated by character type. Heroes changed quite a bit over time while villains didn't at all.

in the introduction, are teaching tools for our younger generations about gender roles. If those roles are becoming hypermasculine, should we worry about the negative sides of stereotypical masculinity, such as violence and lack of self-control, being taught to children?

Limitations & Future Directions

When planning the coding, the stereotypical gender behaviors would have been better supported with some sort of survey to see if those identified in 1972 by Broverman still held such sway today.

The co-coder was very similar to me in demographics; the correlations may be higher than they would be with a coder who was male, conservative, or non-white.

Taking the difference between modern and classic films into account, future studies on children's' interpretation of the gender roles in Disney movies should separate the old from the new and compare them.

This same procedure would be interesting applied to top-grossing films every year to see if the drift towards the masculine could be identified in more than children's movies. I'd like to know if this is a cultural shift or one that only applies to Disney.

Conclusion

Disney movies are a significant aspect of American culture that have been with us for almost 80 years. Intended to entertain and instruct children, they are both reflective of changes in our culture and create the change themselves, as these stories are the common stories of our younger generations, something they are familiar with and in some way shape their worldviews with. Over time, the characters in these stories have become more masculine, which is perhaps good news when we look at the frail, docile Snow White, but is the comically masculine Gaston the future that Disney's heroes are headed for?

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Appendix A

Films coded by a second coder for reliability are italicized.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937)

[Dumbo](#) (1941)

Cinderella (1950)

Peter Pan (1953)

Sleeping Beauty (1959)

The Sword in the Stone (1963)

[The Aristocats](#) (1970)

The Rescuers (1977)

The Black Cauldron (1985)

Oliver & Company (1988)

~~The Rescuers Down Under (1990)*~~

Beauty and the Beast (1991)*

Aladdin (1992)

Pocahontas (1995)

Hercules (1997)

Tarzan (1999)

The Emperor's New Groove (2000)

Lilo & Stitch (2002)

Brother Bear (2003)

Chicken Little (2005)

Bolt (2008)

Tangled (2010)

*"The Rescuers Down Under" was struck from the list and replaced with "Beauty and the Beast" due to the characters in the sequel not featuring any major changes from the way they were portrayed in the first film.

Appendix B

Coding Manual

The heroes and villains whose behaviors will be coded will be identified prior to coding. Disney's overarching theme for its stories is wishes and dreams being achieved. In general, then, main characters will have something that they want. This should be identified for each main character.

Coding formatted to dichotomous descriptive words (Stereotypical Male Traits on the left, Stereotypical Female Traits on the right) on a 7 point Likert scale.

Each character's behaviors are coded twice per movie: for the rising action (everything leading up to the climax) of the film, and the conclusion (the wrapping up of the story that occurs after the climax) of the film. Take note of particular examples of behaviors representative of what was coded in the space under the Likert Scale.

When coding the conclusion, start with what was coded in the rising action and ask "is there any evidence that this number has changed after the climax?"

The definitions to be used for the descriptive words follow.

Strong: especially competent, mentally or physically.

Weak: especially incompetent, mentally or physically

Rough: Acting with or characterized by violence, uncivil, rude

Gentle: Acting with or characterized by nonviolence, civil, polite

Independent: not influenced or controlled by others in matters of opinion or conduct

Dependent: easily influenced or controlled by others in matters of opinion or conduct

Active: characterized by physical or mental activity, causing action

Passive: characterized by physical or mental inactivity, object of action

Unemotional: not subject to or easily affected by emotion

Emotional: subject to or easily affected by emotion

Objective: not influenced by personal feelings, interpretations, or prejudice; based on facts

Subjective: influenced by personal feelings, interpretations, or prejudice; based on emotions

Competitive: having a strong desire to compete or succeed
Uncompetitive: apathetic towards competing or succeeding

Logical: possessing reason or sound judgment
Illogical: not possessing reason or sound judgment

Dominant: having or exerting authority or influence
Submissive: unresisting or obedient

Loud: strongly audible or exceptional intensity
Quiet : making little or no noise or sound, especially no disturbing sounds

Appendix C

Sample Coding Worksheet

Movie: Beauty and the Beast

Name: Beast (Prince Adam)

Gender: Male

This character is _____ in the rising action of the movie.

Strong---1---2---3---4---5---6---7---Weak

Rough---1---2---3---4---5---6---7---Gentle

Independent---1---2---3---4---5---6---7---Dependent

Active---1---2---3---4---5---6---7---Passive

Unemotional ---1---2---3---4---5---6---7---Emotional

Objective ---1---2---3---4---5---6---7---Subjective

Competitive---1---2---3---4---5---6---7---Uncompetitive

Logical---1---2---3---4---5---6---7---Illogical

Dominant---1---2---3---4---5---6---7---Submissive

Loud---1---2---3---4---5---6---7---Quiet