

Candidate 4 evidence

Sociology Assignment

Gender role socialisation in Disney Princess media

SCN:

There is a distinction between gender and sex: sex is something considered biologically innate while gender is, according to Judith Butler, something we put on in the morning and perform throughout the day. Butler suggests that gender is socially and culturally constructed by how we present ourselves and this is what creates the typical archetype for man and woman. For example, girls should wear makeup and wear dresses and tight blouses, meanwhile boys should wear trousers and roll around in the mud. Some people think that gender is that girls are the damsel in distress and boys are the shining knight that will save them from whatever crisis they are in, a trope that has been common in many of the mainstream Disney Princess movies that Hollywood has spoon-fed young impressionable girls since the first Snow White was released in 1963. Many parents sit their children in front of the TV to watch these movies, unaware that what they're showing help maintain the rigid stereotypes that hold society back politically, socially, and economically, reaffirming any belief that women need a man to help them.

The hypothesis of this report is that gender stereotypes are reinforced in the media, specifically in Disney Princess movies.

A common sense view is that gender is determined by the sex you were born. Gender and sex are entwined and can be distinguished by the way someone looks. For example, women should have long hair, wear makeup and dresses, and be well groomed. Men should have short hair, and men who are well-groomed and wear makeup are negatively labelled as gay, even if not. Gender can also be distinguished by behaviour, such as women crossing their legs and speaking softly while men are loud, aggressive, and emotionally reserved. In the show 'Big Bang Theory', three educated women go to Disneyland and although incredibly clever, they become excited to dress up like one of the Princesses. Even in a popular show aired by Channel 4, it promotes the idea that even the cleverest women have an innate and natural desire to play princess and dress up.

First Research Study- Julia Golden

The aim of Julia Golden's (2015) study was to examine how gender stereotypes impact young girls between the ages of 3 and 5 years old, and how Disney media influences the girl's play pretend. Golden hopes that the results of the study lead to the reconsideration of parents and carers choosing what type of media they expose their children to. Golden looks at socioeconomics which is a stance Golden claims that other researchers had not delved into before.

The first finding for this study was behaviour. Golden found that girls who participated in princess play (wearing the dress and accessories) was significantly different to girls who did not participate. This behaviour was noted in three separate categories; increased beauty related remarks, increased focus on clothing, and the exclusion of boys. Girls during princess play remarked "Look at my beautiful dress" and "I'm so pretty", which are comments that Golden noted that not any of the non-participating girls had made. Golden acknowledged in her study that the introduction to princess play was a 'demonstration of physical attractiveness' and that the dresses only encouraged the girls to admire, acknowledge and accentuate their beauty. Some girls in the study compared themselves to other girls, behaviour that Golden says will lead to 'self-objectification' and by pretending to be princesses they are reinforcing the idea that Disney uses princesses solely as markers for beauty and attitude. Having these characters as role models, girls reflect these beauty ideals on themselves.

In the second of Golden's findings, two girls had dressed as their chosen princesses; one was Cinderella and the other as Rapunzel. Cinderella commented to Rapunzel, "I look more beautiful." and in response Rapunzel removed her dress and begged to swap with Cinderella, which is an act Golden states 'encouraged unhealthy competition' and forced the girls to concentrate on physical beauty above all else, including their friendship with each other.

Another of Golden's findings was that participants of the study began to display unique body movements that could be attributed to classic 'Princess behaviour' such as ballroom dancing, twirling, and holding their hands in a modest, prayer-like manner. Golden addresses that unique actions were not exclusive to girls involved in the princess play but

instead they changed their behaviour to be more princess-like and to fit in with the character they were portraying while boys in superhero costumes would fight with loud sound effects to mimic the battles they see on TV and in comics. Golden suggests that this change in attitude and mannerisms merely emphasised their femininity during princess play and found that twirling was considered a 'highly gendered mannerism' that girls would use to gain the attention of boys (Mindy Blaise, 2005). Another mannerism that seemed to gain attention for girls was slouching or sulking which although is not as noticeable as a twirl, seemed to be just as effective (Blaise, 2005).

Second Research Study- Karen Wohlwend

Karen Wohlwend's study involved elements of natural observation in order to collect data, along with semi-structured interviews and parent questionnaires. The study examined how playing with princess dolls translated into creating storylines through working, directing and acting workshops. The class examined by Wohlwend consisted of 5 to 6-year olds however she only focused on three girls (two are Chinese-American, one is Filipino-American) and two boys (both are Russian-Americans). Wohlwend finds a number of similar trends in her own observation that are supported by Golden's later adaptation. For example, Wohlwend discovers that the children who adopt the princess personas become obsessed by looks, and comments acknowledging their beauty were considered valuable however Wohlwend did not analyse this finding in length. In Wohlwend's study, Zoe (one of the girls Wohlwend had studied) was directing a remake of 'Sleeping Beauty' after creating a script for her and the other actors to follow. During a wedding scene, Zoe instructs her actors to comment on how pretty her dress is, stating "Now you say 'what a pretty dress you have on'."

In the second finding, the girls held power over the boys by excluding them from their princess roleplay and only welcomed their involvement if the boys added to their already established fantasy family-play by proposing to be a family member or a sibling. Once commercial dolls had been introduced (iconic Disney figures) the girls completely excluded boys unless they had a commercial doll too, and the boys only redeemed their status once another girl had traded her doll with him.

A positive of Wohlwend's study, and the third finding, was that the entirety of the study was long term and allowed for progress to be observed. With what was considered more 'passive qualities' of the princess dolls, a participant began to give her Mulan doll more progressive characteristics and abilities such as giving her the ability to fly. Wohlwend suggests that despite this progressiveness, the girl still struggled with incorporating Disney's female passivity into her princess play as well as, her mother said, her own love for comic books and superheroes.

Evaluation and Conclusion

A limitation of Wohlwend's study, which Golden later picked up and adapted, was that the data collection only consisted from three girls around the same age range which makes it difficult to predict or apply any data with complete confidence. Wohlwend added that the environment that the observation took place was unlike any other class and in fact was unusually playful compared to any other classroom she had experienced. This meant that during a task that involved creativity children were already comfortable exploring the depths of their imagination as they had grown accustomed to doing so anyway. In each study the focus tends to be with young girls and their relationship with Disney Princesses with very little consideration for the relationship boys have with Disney Princes and whether this exposure leads to the same level of hypermasculinity as seen with females and accentuated feminine attributes.

The functionalist belief is that gender is innate and is essential for constructing and maintaining social stability and order, and the norms, values, and roles of society, a view shared amongst functionalists. Functionalism is a macro theory which suggests that society is a complex system that work together to enforce stability and compares society to the human body. This theory suggests that any gender inequalities that exist are a means to create an equal division of labour and that gender roles were established before the pre-industrial with men being the hunters and while women were in charge of homemaking and were often physically limited with the restraints of pregnancy. Golden mentioned in her study that out of 5 Disney princess movies studied, women were recorded to do 39 household chores while men were only observed to perform 6 (Beth A. Wiersma, 2000). It was also noted that when characters with authority figures were examined, the finding switched and men domineered as most male characters were princes, kings, captains, colonels and policemen (Wiersma, 2000).

However, a criticism of functionalism is that it is considered discriminatory and the gender roles it enforces should not be upheld as a result and with the rise of feminism, functionalism slowly started to decline as women broke away from the family structure. As Disney movies are made, each princess progresses with the surge of feminism and each movie the princess is removed more from the old 'damsel-in-distress' idea. For example, the movie Brave (2012) is centred on the princess, Merida, fighting to pick her own path in life

instead of succumbing to an unwanted marriage. Merida's mother, due to a curse, turns into a bear- not an elegant, beautiful animal like a swan. It accentuates her worst feature, her anger. However, the characters are all still conventionally attractive.

In conclusion, the evidence provided in each of the studies supports that hypothesis that Disney Princess media does enforce gender stereotypes and many girls feel pressure to conform to the accepted and traditional female ideals such as being kind, caring, attractive and thin, all traits seen within the Disney Princess universe. For example, reading the Disney wikia, Princesses such as Snow White, Belle (Beauty and the Beast) and Aurora (Sleeping Beauty) all share similar traits such as being patient, kind, mature, elegant, motherly, and sweet.

However, although the evidence presented in the report supports the hypothesis, there is still not enough sociological evidence for any definitive support of the hypothesis. Even in Wohlwend's study, one girl began to move away from the Disney Princess play in favour of making her dolls stronger and less dependent on any prince to save her. The girl alters her doll to become more hero-like, however she states that Mulan 'can't have too many powers' and replaced her traditional Chinese clothes for a miniskirt and red jacket. As this girl's family was Chinese, this could be considered a form of Westernising the youth and could create cross-culture tension. Most Disney movies are based around white-European folklore and fairy tales in medieval European clothes and with middle class Americans as the protagonists. Comic books, while considered more empowering, still hypersexualise women with formfitting outfits and unrealistic representations of the female figure such as large chests and a tiny, unattainable waist that realistically wouldn't be able to support the top half of their body. Feminists would suggest that exposure to both types of media leads to self-objectifying effects that Golden had mentioned in her own study. This shows that each child's interpretation to Disney media is unique and different which means a definite answer cannot be made.

Should there be a policy or age rating on Disney Princess movies to avoid the socialisation of gender roles and stereotypes on young children? No, and even if there were it wouldn't be certain to deter parents from buying their children their products or sitting them in front of the movies. After all, many parents still buy their children 18 rated video games such as 'Grand Theft Auto'. Disney, however, should continue to progress in creating more gender-

blind material or delve into creating characters that go against the established stereotypes like more soft, gentle, and emotional men, or princesses that go out their way to save not only the men but everyone in danger.

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