ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Gender Role Portrayal and the Disney Princesses

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Abstract The popular Disney Princess line includes nine films (e.g., *Snow White*, *Beauty and the Beast*) and over 25,000 marketable products. Gender role depictions of the prince and princess characters were examined with a focus on their behavioral characteristics and climactic outcomes in the films. Results suggest that the prince and princess characters differ in their portrayal of traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics, these gender role portrayals are complex, and trends towards egalitarian gender roles are not linear over time. Content coding analyses demonstrate that all of the movies portray some stereotypical representations of gender, including the most recent film, *The Princess and the Frog*. Although both the male and female roles have changed over time in the Disney Princess line, the male characters exhibit more androgyny throughout and less change in their gender role portrayals.

Keywords Children · Disney · Film · Gender · Gender role

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Introduction

The Disney Princess line was created in 2001 as an advertising and marketing campaign targeted toward young girls (Orenstein 2006). Although the first of the Disney Princess movies was released in 1937, a strong marketing franchise has reinvigorated the popularity of the Disney Princess line (Disney Princess 2010). The advertising campaign aims to attract a wide audience of girls with the ultimate goal of encouraging children to personally identify with the characters so that they will purchase the associated products (Do Rozario 2004). The franchise now includes over 25,000 products and it contributed greatly to the rise of Disney marketing sales from $300 million in 2001 to $4 billion by 2008 (Setoodeh and Yabroff 2007). Disney and its princess phenomenon have been identified as a powerful influence on children's media and product consumerism, contributing to a new "girlhood" that is largely defined by gender and the consumption of related messages and products (Giroux 1997; Lacroix 2004; McRobbie 2008; Orenstein 2006). Though the Disney Princess movies are produced in the United States and the phenomenon is American, Disney has a strong international presence and marketing efforts (Disney International 2010). Thus, the Disney Princess line and its gender role portrayals have important implications for international children's media as well (Hubka et al. 2009).

The present study examines the nine Disney Princess movies in three groupings: the earlier movies, middle movies, and the most current film. The earlier movies were released between 1937 and 1959. These are *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). Thirty years later, a group of five middle movies began release: *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas*
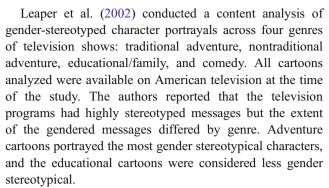
(1995), and *Mulan* (1998). The most current Disney Princess film, *The Princess and the Frog*, opened in 2009. The three chronologically distinct groups offer an opportunity to explore changes in the Disney Princess line over time.

Each of the Disney Princess movies feature a central female character, the princess, and a male character who is romantically linked with the princess. This study utilized a coded content analysis approach to examine these primary characters' gender portrayals to reveal the roles present in this popular genre of films, and assess changes over time. Gender roles—how gender is portrayed via assumed behaviors and social roles—can be stereotypical, neutral, or counter-stereotypical to traditional gender roles (Durkin 1985a). The characteristics of interest in this study include traditionally masculine (e.g., athletic, brave) and traditionally feminine (e.g., helpful, nurturing) characteristics exhibited by the prince and princess characters through their behaviors and actions. In addition, these films contain climactic rescue scenes which were examined for the role each character played (i.e., whether the character was rescued or performed the rescue). The constructivist approach and cultivation theory suggest that the gender role portrayals present in the films may influence children's beliefs and ideas about gender, social behaviors, and norms (Gerbner et al. 1980, 1994; Graves 1999; Martin et al. 2002).

Media and Gender Role Portrayal

There have been several informative studies that address gender role portrayals in children's media. Thompson and Zerbinos (1995) analyzed 175 episodes of 41 different cartoons available on an American television station and found that the programs had gender stereotyped messages. The study reported that though male and female characters were portrayed stereotypically, cartoons produced after 1980 showed less stereotypical gender behavior than those produced before 1980. The authors compared cartoons for variability between male and female characters, and performed an analysis of changes over time. Further, this study introduced the importance of coding rescuing behavior as a potential source of gendered messages. The present study extends this line of research by incorporating similar behavioral codes for gendered characteristics (e.g., being assertive, independent, affectionate, and sensitive), expanding the variables of interest exhibited by the prince and princess characters, and examining the most and least commonly portrayed characteristics by each gender. (Thompson and Zerbinos 1995). In addition, the current study offers insight into changes in gendered content over time within a unique framework, as both early and late Disney Princess films are similarly marketed and viewed by today's audiences (Orenstein 2006).

Leaper et al. (2002) conducted a content analysis of gender-stereotyped character portrayals across four genres of television shows: traditional adventure, nontraditional adventure, educational/family, and comedy. All cartoons analyzed were available on American television at the time of the study. The authors reported that the television programs had highly stereotyped messages but the extent of the gendered messages differed by genre. Adventure cartoons portrayed the most gender stereotypical characters, and the educational cartoons were considered less gender stereotypical.

A review of research on social script acquisition in media revealed the importance of the resolutions in the Disney Princess films. Consistent portrayals of meaningful gendered patterns (e.g., who performs climactic rescues) may contribute to the social scripts the viewer creates when exposed to gender-stereotyped content (Geis et al. 1984). Further research has demonstrated the concept of script acquisition is applicable to young children (Durkin and Nugent 1998). Eggermont (2006) found that television viewing predicted traditional social scripts regarding romantic relationships specifically, which are highlighted in the Disney Princess films. Additional research has supported the notion that romantic behaviors such as dating and flirting are influenced by an individual's social scripts and understanding of norms (Morr Serewicz and Gale 2008).

Several studies highlight the implications of televised media with regard to gender. Higher levels of exposure to television have been correlated with more traditional ideas of gender roles (Frueh and McGee 1975; Williams 1981). Television has been identified as a dominant source of social influence on children's gender concepts (Leaper 2000). In addition, television viewing has been connected with some pro-social as well as aggressive behaviors (Calvert and Huston 1987).

Disney Films and Gender Role Portrayal

Disney films specifically have been shown to portray some stereotypical depictions of gender. An examination of six Disney heroines found a focus on their sexuality and the "exotic," particularly in characters of color (Lacroix 2004). The author cited numerous examples of both sexism and racism in the films, specifically noting the heroines' extremely pale skin tones, small waists, delicate limbs, and full breasts. A review of 16 Disney films revealed that the presented gender images were not current with societal developments in gender equity (Wiserma 2001). Highlighted in this analysis was the preponderance of domestic work performed by female characters. Towbin et al. (2003) reviewed 26 Disney films for cultural constructs, including gender, and noted the

persistence of stereotypes throughout, albeit with less stereotyping in later films.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate the interesting work that has been done in the field of gender role portrayal and stereotypes in a selection of Disney movies. However, an important limitation of these studies is the qualitative nature of the analyses (Dundes 2001; Lacroix 2004; Ono and Buescher 2001). No study to date has examined the entire Disney Princess line for the gender role portrayals present in the films, and there is little commentary available regarding the most current film, *The Princess and the Frog*. Therefore, the present study adds to the body of literature by providing a systematic, quantitative comparison of the main characters' attributes, actions and outcomes in a thematically unified, highly popular grouping of Disney films. Further, the films span a period from 1937 to the present, allowing for a chronological analysis of the princess line's gender depictions.

Theoretical Perspectives of Gender Role Portrayal

The present study was not designed to explore the effect of viewing gendered stereotypes or egalitarian depictions on children. However, part of its importance lies in the possibility that exposure to gendered material may influence children's gender role acquisition and expression. Children certainly seem to be conscious of gendered portrayals. Oliver and Green (2001) suggest that animated content for children is often targeted toward one gender, and that children are well aware of the gender classifications of such media. In fact, the children in their study actively used this background knowledge to predict which cartoons boys or girls would identify with and like better. Thompson and Zerbinos (1995) relatedly found that children who recognized more gender stereotyping in cartoons had similarly gendered expectations for themselves and others. Consistently portrayed gender role images may be interpreted as "normal" by children and become connected with their concepts of socially acceptable behavior and morality. For example, when children see villainy in a character illustrated via gender transgression (e.g., a male villain appearing effeminate), they may develop lasting negative associations with non-stereotypical gendered behavior (Li-Vollmer and LaPointe 2003).

The constructivist approach and cultivation theory both suggest there may be an effect of viewing gendered stereotypes upon children (Graves 1999). The constructivist approach proposes that children develop beliefs about the world based on their interpretations of observations and experiences (Martin et al. 2002), and therefore, viewing stereotyped or egalitarian depictions of gender roles will influence children's ideas about gender (Graves 1999). Cultivation theory posits that exposure to television content helps develop concepts regarding social behavior and norms (Gerbner et al. 1980, 1994). Thus, children's media influences a child's socialization process and the gendered information children view may have a direct effect on their cognitive understanding of gender and their behavior (Graves 1999). Further, cultivation theory posits that higher levels of exposure to gendered messages are likely associated with stronger effects on children's gender socialization (Klein et al. 2000).

Most children are regularly exposed to animated cartoons (Klein et al. 2000). The constructivist approach and cultivation theory suggest the gendered content they contain may impact children's gender role acquisition (Graves 1999; Klein et al. 2000). Many children have access to the Disney animated movies, as they are popular for this age group (Orenstein 2006), and parents perceive Disney as quality family entertainment (Buckingham 1997). Furthermore, the marketing power of the Disney Princess line in particular enhances the probability that children will see one or more of the films (Do Rozario 2004). Consequently, children's perceptions of social roles and gender identity may be influenced by this media experience and the stereotypes portrayed (Durkin 1985b).

Current Study

The present study examined gender role portrayals in the Disney Princess movies and the gendered nature of climactic rescues. This study had three hypotheses. The first hypothesis considered the gender of the character, with the expectation that the prince and princess' gender role portrayals would differ. We expected that the princesses would show more traditionally feminine than masculine characteristics, and the princes would show more traditionally masculine than feminine characteristics. Correspondingly, our second hypothesis was that the princes would perform more rescues than the princesses, and the princesses would be rescued more often than the princes. The third hypothesis involved changes in the Disney Princess films over time. We expected the gender role portrayals, measured via the characters' behavioral characteristics and the resolutions in the films, would become more egalitarian over time. Although we did not anticipate completely egalitarian or counter-stereotypical prince and princess characterizations, we expected substantial changes in the gender role portrayals across the three groups of movies: the earliest Disney Princess films, the middle films, and the most current film. Specifically, we predicted increased androgyny among the characters, such that over time the princes would portray more traditionally feminine characteristics and the princesses would portray more stereotypically masculine characteristics.

Method

A coded content analysis approach was used to identify and record each gendered behavior or characteristic depicted in the films. Similar methodology has been shown to be useful and valid in previous research (Thompson and Zerbinos 1995; Towbin et al. 2003). This method enabled us to gather quantitative information about the types of behaviors portrayed by the films' main female and male characters, how often such behaviors were depicted, and how these connected to the characters' gender. Table 1 lists each film analyzed, the year the film was released, and the number of codes viewed in each film.

Coding Procedure

Codes and coding procedures were informed by previous research on gender and animated film (Do Rozario 2004; Dundes 2001; Durkin 1985a; Hoerrner 1996; Klein et al. 2000; Leaper et al. 2002; Thompson and Zerbinos 1995). Themes that emerged during the initial viewings of the movies also determined several coding characteristics. Initial coding characteristics and coding guidelines were established by the first author. To achieve consistency in coding within and between films, the coding system was refined with input from the research team. As part of this process, the first and third authors test-coded clips of the films, compared and contrasted the outcomes, and used the results to hone the coding schemes.

The prince and princess characters were coded separately. The character was assigned one code every time they (a) were mentioned as possessing a certain characteristic or (b) exhibited the characteristic in their behavior. Each time the character exhibited a new behavior, the behavior was coded. In addition, a new behavior was coded each time the scene changed (i.e., the animated picture changed or shifted to a new setting), even

if that behavior was exhibited in previous scenes. The use of two coders enabled intercoder reliability comparison. Each coded the first 25 minutes of all nine movies (the clips used to hone the initial coding process were taken from other parts of the films). The coders' results were then compared using intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC) (Shrout & Fleiss 1979). The average ICC's for the characteristics exhibited by the princesses were .96 (range of .65–1) and the average ICC's for the princes were .96 (range of .60–1). Coders were in complete agreement for the occurrence of rescuing behaviors by the prince and princess characters, and the romantic conclusions of the films. Once intercoder reliability was sufficient, one coder analyzed the entirety of five full-length movies and the other coded the remaining four films.

Operational Definitions of Coding Characteristics

The films' content was coded for the gendered characteristics of the prince and princess characters, the performance of climactic rescues by the characters, and the romantic resolution for the prince and princess characters at the end of the movie. The coding characteristics were identified as traditionally masculine or traditionally feminine according to past content analysis literature (Do Rozario 2004; Dundes 2001; Durkin 1985a; Hoerrner 1996; Klein et al. 2000; Leaper et al. 2002; Thompson and Zerbinos 1995). All characteristics were assessed for both the princess and prince, unless otherwise noted below. The operational definitions for the codes were established by the authors based on the content analysis literature reviewed and are described below.

Masculine Characteristics

Curious about princess—exhibiting a studious, concerned expression when looking at the princess. This behavior

Table 1 Coded characteristics for the prince and princess characters in the Disney princess films

Film	Year	Prince			Princess		
		Masc.	Fem.	Total	Masc.	Fem.	Total
Early Films							
Snow White	1937	12	10	22	13	137	150
Cinderella	1950	2	5	7	42	187	229
Sleeping Beauty	1959	59	52	111	10	76	86
Middle Films							
The Little Mermaid	1989	78	52	130	101	161	262
Beauty and the Beast	1991	54	31	85	77	87	164
Aladdin	1992	63	109	172	50	77	127
Pocahontas	1995	117	95	212	105	130	235
Mulan	1998	49	12	61	88	120	208
Most Current Film							
Princess and the Frog	2009	60	129	189	81	93	174

suggested that the female had a mystique that was captivating and romantically compelling. This was only coded for the prince characters.

Wants to explore—to search for, to investigate, to want to find out or explore the unknown.

Physically strong—hitting or moving something, providing evidence that the character had a strong physical effect on the person or object. This was different from a simple athletic display. There was a separate code for athletic, defined below, and the codes were mutually exclusive, as it was understood that displays of physical strength often incorporated some athleticism.

Assertive—insistence upon a right or claim, the action of declaring or positively stating. Assertiveness included polite assertiveness with a hint of aggression. Assertiveness was a strong, direct assertion of a position or idea.

Unemotional—repression of emotion, indifference to pleasure or pain. A character was unemotional in response to something that might seem to warrant an emotional response, such as a death.

Independent—not depending on the authority of another, autonomous, self-governing. A character was considered independent when performing an independent action against many, being alone when it was not the norm, or not participating in the expected culture.

Athletic—a specific jump or kick that was large enough to require some athleticism. Running was also coded as athletic.

Engaging in intellectual activity—engaging the intellect, including reading or showing the use of thought.

Inspires fear—causing someone to respond with fear, which is defined as uneasiness caused by the sense of impending danger. This includes portraying violence and aggression, intimidation, or unintentionally inspiring fear as well.

Brave—courageous, daring, intrepid. Bravery often involved a rescue or leadership in the face of danger.

Described as physically attractive (masculine)—a characters' expression about the handsomeness of the prince.

Gives advice—providing suggestions, recommendations or consultation. This was coded regardless of whether advice was asked for or whether it was warranted, appreciated, or helpful.

Leader—one who leads, a commander. Leader was only coded if the character was leading a group of people, not animals and not just him- or herself. It also was only used to describe physical leadership in which a person is seen in front of and directing people and involved giving orders.

Feminine Characteristics

Tends to physical appearance—adjusting physical appearance for the purpose of making it look better or to draw attention to it.

Physically weak—not being able to succeed in something that takes physical strength. It was often accompanied by needing help or else failing.

Submissive—yielding to power or authority, humble and ready obedience. This trait was usually in response to another character's assertiveness.

Shows emotion—the expression of both positive and negative representation of feeling. This was only coded for princes because initial piloting of the coding scheme indicated princesses consistently displayed emotion at each opportunity throughout and it was unreasonable to code.

Affectionate—having warm regard or love for a person or animal, fond, loving. This required direct interaction and required a physical display of love such as a hug, a kiss, or an individual touch for the point of illustrating affection.

Nurturing—to care for and encourage the growth or development of, to foster. Being nurturing required direct interaction and was often shown as mothering. It involved prolonged touching and attention in a soothing manner (different than a brief instance of affection) or lending care and help in a loving way to either animals or people.

Sensitive—perception, knowledge, connected with. This code was distinguished as a form of empathy, as being sensitive required being aware of another person's or animal's issues from a distance without interacting directly with them at that time.

Tentative—in an experimental manner, uncertain, cautious, seen in behavior or speech.

Helpful—rendering or affording help, useful when assistance is needed. This required a specific action performed that gave another person or animal direct assistance. It was not used in a broader way to describe a character's role in a scene.

Troublesome—causing trouble, turmoil, disturbance. This was recorded when the character was being discussed by other characters in a way that made clear that the character had caused trouble that others were trying to solve.

Fearful—an instance of emotion, a particular apprehension of some future evil, a state of alarm or dread.

Ashamed—affected with shame, the painful emotion arising from the consciousness of dishonoring and guilt. While both characters were eligible to be coded for ashamed, it was only portrayed by the princesses and thus is considered a female trait.

Collapses crying—the character puts his/her face down, such that it was no longer visible, and cries, usually in rocking shakes and sobs. Sitting and crying while showing the face did not count; the character must have thrown him/herself on or against something (e.g., a bed, the floor) in a statement of physical and mental helplessness.

Described as physically attractive (feminine)— Another characters' expression about the beauty of the princess.

Asks for or accepts advice or help—the character asks directly for help, or needs assistance and is open to receiving assistance such that it is clear the character wants it and accepts it. Assistance could be physical, mental, or emotional.

Victim—subjected to torture by another, one who suffers severely in body or property through cruel or oppressive treatment. Physical harm or abuse was used as a defining factor in this code. Victimization was coded even if it was voluntary.

Results

The nine films were coded in order of their production, beginning with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937) and ending with *The Princess and the Frog* (2009).

Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis suggested that the prince and princess characters' gender role portrayals would vary according to their gender. In examining the Disney Princess movie line as a whole, we predicted that the princes would show more masculine characteristics overall and the princesses would show more feminine characteristics overall. An independent *t*-test was conducted comparing the prince and princess characters on the feminine and masculine characteristics portrayed, using the percentage of feminine and masculine characteristics from the total characteristics displayed for each character. The results indicate that the princes and princesses differed significantly on total masculine and feminine characteristics exhibited, $t(16) = -2.47$, $p = .025$. The mean for masculine characteristics for the princes was 51.63 and for the princesses, 33.01. The mean for feminine characteristics for the princes was 48.48 and for the princesses, 66.99. The princes displayed 494 traditionally masculine characteristics, 49.95% of their total characteristics, and the princesses displayed 567 masculine characteristics, or 34.68% of their total coding characteristics (see Table 1). In contrast, the princes displayed 495 traditionally feminine characteristics, 50.05% of their total characteristics, and the princesses displayed 1068 feminine characteristics, 65.32% of their total characteristics (see Table 1).

To further explore the differences in gendered characteristics portrayed by the prince and princess characters, independent *t*-tests were conducted comparing the prince and princess characters for each characteristic. This was done using the percentage from total codes for each gender to compensate for the greater number of codes recorded for the princesses. For example, while the princesses were brave 60 times, this was 10.83% of the total codes for the princesses, whereas the princes were brave 24 times, but

this was nearly 5% of the total codes for the princes. The counts and percentages for masculine characteristics displayed by the princes and princesses are listed from most frequently displayed to least in Table 2. The counts and percentages for feminine characteristics displayed by the princes and princesses are listed from most frequently displayed to least in Table 3. For masculine characteristics (Table 2), there was significant difference between the princes and princesses on the portrayal of physical strength, $t(16) = -3.74$, $p = .002$. For feminine characteristics, there was significant difference between the princes and princesses on the portrayal of affection, $t(16) = 2.173$, $p = .045$, fearfulness, $t(16) = 3.28$, $p = .005$, submissive, $t(16) = 2.95$, $p = .009$, nurturing behavior, $t(16) = 2.12$, $p = .05$, tending to physical appearance, $t(16) = 3.99$, $p = .001$, and collapsing crying, $t(16) = 4.78$, $p < .001$.

It is useful to examine the most common and least common characteristics shown by the prince and princess characters, as each incorporated traditional and nontraditional characteristics for their gender. The five most common characteristics of the princes were: shows emotion, affectionate, physically strong, assertive, and athletic. Interestingly, the first and second most common behaviors portrayed by the princes were traditionally feminine traits. However, the three least commonly portrayed behaviors for the princes are all traditionally feminine. These include tending to physical appearance, being ashamed, and collapsing to cry.

The five most common attributes and behaviors portrayed by the princesses were also mixed, although three of the five are considered traditionally feminine: affectionate, assertive, fearful, troublesome, and athletic. Assertiveness is a traditionally masculine behavior, though it is worth noting that the majority of the princesses' assertive behaviors, particularly in the earlier Disney Princess movies, were directed toward animals rather than people. The least commonly portrayed characteristics for the princesses all are traditionally masculine and include: being unemotional or stoic, being a leader, inspiring fear, and performing a rescue.

Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis anticipated that rescuing actions would vary by the gender of the character. There were 56 instances of rescuing behavior recorded, including performing a rescue or being rescued. Consistent with our predictions, the princess characters were rescued 17 times and performed only 13 rescues in the films. However, the prince characters were more androgynous in the frequency of rescuing actions: the princes rescued 13 times and were rescued 13 times. Despite the fact that the princes had fewer behavior codes than the princesses on average, they

Table 2 Masculine characteristics portrayed by the princes and princesses in the Disney princess films

Characteristic	Frequency code	Percent of total behaviors
Princes		
Physically Strong	96	9.71*
Assertive	90	9.10
Athletic	82	8.29
Curious Towards Princess	55	5.56
Unemotional	29	2.93
Gives Advice	29	2.93
Inspires Fear	28	2.83
Brave	24	2.43
Leader	14	1.42
Performs Rescue	13	1.31
Intellectual Activity	11	1.11
Wants to Explore	10	1.01
Independent	7	.71
Described as Handsome	6	.61
Princesses		
Assertive	204	12.47
Athletic	88	5.38
Brave	60	3.67
Independent	49	3.00
Wants to Explore	44	2.69
Intellectual Activity	38	2.32
Physically Strong	35	2.14*
Gives Advice	17	1.04
Performs Rescue	13	.80
Unemotional	13	.80
Inspires Fear	3	.18
Leader	3	.18

*significant at $p < .05$

Table 3 Feminine characteristics portrayed by the princes and princesses in the Disney princess films

Characteristic	Frequency code	Percent of total behaviors
Princes		
Shows Emotion	152	15.37
Affectionate	107	1.82*
Fearful	39	3.94*
Physically Weak	33	3.34
Tentative	28	2.83
Sensitive	27	2.73
Helpful	24	2.43
Asks for Advice or Help	20	2.02
Troublesome	16	1.62
Gets Rescued	13	1.31
Submissive	12	1.21*
Victim	11	1.11
Nurturing	9	.91*
Tends to Physical Appearance	4	.40*
Ashamed	0	.00
Collapses Crying	0	.00*
Princesses		
Affectionate	273	16.70*
Fearful	141	8.62*
Troublesome	93	5.69
Tends to Physical Appearance	81	4.95*
Helpful	69	4.22
Nurturing	61	3.73*
Tentative	57	3.49
Submissive	48	2.94*
Sensitive	37	2.26
Collapses Crying	37	2.26*
Described as Pretty	37	2.26
Asks for Advice or Help	34	2.08
Physically Weak	33	2.02
Ashamed	27	1.65
Victim	23	1.41
Gets Rescued	17	1.04

*significant at $p < .05$

maintained relative numbers of rescues and being rescued, suggesting that the princes participated in more action during their limited involvement. The princes often performed the climactic rescue of the movie on their own, except in *Pocahontas* and *Mulan,* in which the princess was in a position of power during the final rescue. No princess, however, did a final rescue without the assistance of the prince. The prince and the princess did not always rescue each other, though that was more common than not. Occasionally, the rescues involved another character or animal as rescuer or being rescued.

Hypothesis 3

The third hypothesis suggested that the gender role portrayals in the Disney Princess movies would become more egalitarian

over time. The movies were categorized into three chronological groups: the early movies (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Cinderella,* and *Sleeping Beauty*), the middle movies (*The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin, Pocahontas,* and *Mulan*), and the most current (*The Princess and the Frog*). The princesses exhibited more feminine than masculine characteristics in each of the three groups. However, the princesses demonstrated increasingly more masculine characteristics in the early, middle, and late

movies, respectively. The ratio of feminine characteristics exhibited by the princesses decreased over time, with 86% (394 codes) of the princesses' behavior in the early films coded as feminine, reducing to 58% (566) in the middle movies, and 53% (91) in the most current film. In the early movies, 14% of the total characteristics coded for the princesses were masculine (63 codes). This increased to 42% (411) in the middle films, and 47% (80) in the most current film.

Two one-way ANOVAs with planned comparisons were conducted on the percentage values of masculine and feminine characteristics to test the effects of the chronological grouping of films on the gendered characteristics, one using data for the princesses and another for the princes. Gendered characteristics were identified as the ratio of masculine behaviors from total behaviors in the one-way ANOVA, but comparisons using feminine behaviors follow the same pattern as they comprise the remaining percentage of the coded behaviors. For the princess characters, there was a significant difference between the early and middle films, $F(1,6) = 113.12$, $p < .001$, and the early and late films, $F(1,6) = 61.34$, $p < .001$, but the middle and later films did not differ significantly for the masculine or feminine characteristics exhibited by the princesses. Consistent with these findings, the data of counts in Table 1 show that the early princesses displayed far more traditionally feminine characteristics than masculine ones. The middle princesses incorporated more masculine characteristics. The most current film had the most androgynous princess, although neither she nor any princess displayed more masculine characteristics than feminine ones.

In contrast, a one-way ANOVA with planned comparisons revealed that the princes did not differ significantly between the groups of early, middle, and current movies in the occurrence of masculine or feminine behaviors. The princes were slightly more masculine in the early (51%, 70 codes) and middle movies (54%, 353 codes), but the prince was more feminine in the current film (68%, 126 codes). As the count data in Table 1 further illustrate, the princes did not display many codeable characteristics in the early films, which can be explained by their limited screen time. This provides further justification for the use of percentages in the analyses. In the middle films, the princes were shown more frequently and displayed more masculine characteristics than feminine ones, except for *Aladdin*. In the most current film, the prince displayed many more traditionally feminine characteristics than masculine ones.

Examining the prince and princess characters individually compliments the overall finding. The individual movies fluctuate greatly with regard to traditional versus more egalitarian gender role portrayals. The majority of princes (7 of 9) and princesses (7 of 9) had a mix of traditionally feminine and masculine behaviors in the top three charac-

teristics exhibited, though a few remained traditionally gendered. The princess in *Snow White* displayed affection, fearfulness, and nurturing as her three most frequently displayed characteristics, all of which are traditionally feminine. The princess in *Sleeping Beauty* reflected this pattern as well, as she was most frequently affectionate, described as pretty, and tentative. Likewise, in the middle films, the princes in *Beauty and the Beast* and *Mulan* displayed only masculine characteristics as their three most frequently displayed characteristics. The remaining princes showed a mix of gendered characteristics. The prince in *Beauty and the Beast* inspired fear, was assertive, and wanted to explore. The prince in *Mulan* was strong, assertive, and athletic. In contrast, the three most recent movies, *Pocahontas* (1995), *Mulan* (1998), and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), had princesses who displayed more masculine than feminine characteristics in their three most frequent characteristics. This suggests a chronological movement towards a more androgynous princess. There is less of a chronological pattern for the princes in that the prince from *Snow White* (1937), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Aladdin* (1992), and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) all show more feminine than masculine characteristics in their three most frequently shown behaviors. The princes consistently portrayed more androgyny throughout the Disney Princess movies, though there are interesting exceptions in two of the middle movies, *Beauty and the Beast* and *Mulan*, where the princes were masculine in their three most frequent characteristics.

Discussion

Gendered Characteristics

In confirmation of our hypothesis, the first three Disney Princess movies, produced in the 1930s and 50s, depicted in general more gendered attributes for both the princesses and the princes, and employed more traditional gender roles than did the five films produced in and after the 1980s, including the most current film produced in 2009. The princesses in the first three Disney Princess movies were frequently affectionate, helpful, troublesome, fearful, tentative, and described as pretty. Even when an early princess evinced a seemingly masculine characteristic, like assertiveness, in these early films such a trait worked to further traditionally gendered messages. Although the princesses portrayed assertiveness more often than the princes in the early movies and overall, the women were more assertive with animals and children, and far less with other people. This suggests a fairly submissive and limited way of being assertive, as if they could not assert themselves with other adults, but only when they were mothering, or with those

who had less power. The princess was rarely, if ever, seen asserting herself with the prince. The women did tend to be assertive about their fathers' attempts at controlling them. Interestingly, the prince characters did not often have a father figure to assert themselves against. Further, those princes with parents were not controlled in the same way the princesses were. In contrast to the earlier films, the middle and most current films had princesses who were more assertive than in earlier films, and these princesses were assertive towards both people and animals.

The princes in the first three Disney Princess movies showed traditional gender characteristics as well. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, the prince was rarely shown, leaving very little behavior to code. It was not clear how or why the princess fell in love with him; she seemed to be chosen by him and obligingly fell in love. The prince in *Cinderella* had a very small role as well. The prince in *Sleeping Beauty* evinced many traditionally masculine behaviors, such as being physically strong, assertive, athletic, brave and curious about or captivated by the princess. This prince also portrayed a lot of emotion, affection, and asked for advice or help, an exception from the other more stoic princes.

In addition to the messages provided through the commonly portrayed characteristics of the prince and princess, there are gendered messages in characteristics exhibited with the least frequency, suggesting that some gendered characteristics are not permissible for the prince or princesses to portray. For the princes, these included the very feminine behavior of tending to physical appearance, as well as characteristics that suggested a loss of power and hopelessness including being ashamed and collapsing crying. In contrast, the least commonly portrayed characteristics of the princesses were related to gaining positions of power, including being unemotional or stoic, being a leader, inspiring fear, and performing a rescue.

It is apparent that gendered stereotypes and behaviors are still very prevalent in the Disney Princess line, though their depiction has become more complex over the years, reflecting changing gender roles and expectations in American society. Gender expectations were less complex when the first Disney Princess movies were produced and with the rise of feminism in the 1970s through current times they have become more complicated (Ferree et al. 2007). Women used to take care of the house and the children (Coltrane and Shih 2010), and these skills are showcased by the early princesses, such as the princesses in *Cinderella* and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. Women now, however, are expected to maintain such feminine traits, and also to incorporate aspects of "male" traits such as assertiveness, if they are to succeed outside of the home (Coltrane 2004). This development in women's roles was reflected in the middle Princess movies such as *Pocahontas*

and *Mulan*. The princesses participated in stereotypically masculine activities, such as conducting diplomacy and war, yet plot resolutions reflected traditionally valued outcomes for women, such as the princess being paired with the prince and choosing to return to family life rather than pursuing novel opportunities. In the most recent film, *The Princess and the Frog*, the princess was career-oriented, which initially prevented her from socializing and pursuing romantic opportunities. This was presented as a somewhat worrisome trait, in keeping with a society that might still be somewhat cautious of women's greater role in the workplace and what that means for family life (Coltrane and Shih 2010). At the conclusion of the movie, however, she was able to both pursue a successful career and marry the prince.

The prince characters became more complex over time as well. As discussed previously, earlier princes were rarely shown and displayed very masculine traits. For the first time, in *Aladdin*, the prince was the primary focus of the movie. The prince from *The Princess and the Frog* was the first character that was portrayed as a bit incompetent, naïve, and unable to financially support himself. Both princes displayed higher frequencies of feminine behaviors than masculine behaviors.

Characteristics, Gender, and Narrative

It is useful to consider the gendered characteristics analyzed in this study within the larger scripts of the films to better understand some of the gendered messages viewed by children. The prevalence of domestic work is an important theme in the Disney Princess movies and a substantial change that Disney incorporated over time was the temporary discontinuation of domestic work as a symbol of femininity. The first three princesses frequently were shown doing domestic work. In *Cinderella*, the princess did domestic work as an act of submission. She accepted, without complaint the hard labor her step-mother assigned, and always sang and smiled pleasantly while working. The men in the Princess movies never did domestic work. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* it was clear that men were not expected to do domestic work, nor did they have the ability to do so. When the princess cleaned the dwarves' house she stated "you'd think their mother would" and then she realized that they probably did not have a mother *because* the house was dirty. Snow White rescued the dwarves in a traditionally feminine way, by cooking and cleaning and acting as their surrogate mother in order to stay with them. The princesses used domestic work variously as an expression of servitude and a way to gain love. By the middle movies of the 1980s–90s, Disney no longer portrayed the princesses doing domestic work. However, domestic work was very apparent in the most

current film, *The Princess and the Frog*. The princess was portrayed as a very good cook and a good waitress. In addition, her mother was described as "the finest seamstress in New Orleans." The princess, like her mother, made a successful career from traditionally feminine labor. In addition, she is shown sweeping and cleaning several times, actions not seen since the early Disney films. Race scholars may find it worth examining further that a resurgence of domestic work accompanied the first black princess. In keeping with the complexity of gendered messages in these films, however, the princess learned to cook from her father and she was shown teaching the prince how to help in the kitchen.

With the increase in breadth of gender roles displayed in these movies, it could be argued that a viewing child would be exposed to more balanced gender role portrayals. However, the middle movies and most current Disney Princess film still retained messages that are reminiscent of traditional roles, and there are many contradictory gender messages in the later movies that should not be discounted despite evidence of overall improvement in egalitarian content. The princess in the fourth movie, *The Little Mermaid*, was the first to begin to challenge traditional gender roles. This film was produced in 1989, 30 years after *Sleeping Beauty*, the last of the first three films. Considering this, a greater range of female behavior was expected, and indeed was shown. For example, the princess promoted the idea of wanting to explore, and was portrayed as independent and assertive. However, this movie still had many gender stereotypes consistent with those in the three earlier movies, such as high levels of feminine behaviors, including fearfulness, affection, and tending to physical appearance frequently. The prince in *The Little Mermaid* also displayed a mix of non-traditional and traditional gender behavior. He displayed emotion and was highly affectionate. He was shown as physically weak almost as often as he was shown physically strong and was portrayed as both brave and fearful.

In *Beauty and the Beast* the princess, Belle, was equally as brave, a traditionally masculine trait, as she was nurturing, a feminine one. The princess was more assertive and the prince was equally as sensitive as the princess. Belle was shown as independent more often than the prince, but she also was shown as very fearful. Similarly, the prince portrayed stereotypically feminine characteristics, such as showing emotion. This princess was the first to show very high rates of intellectual activity as she read books frequently, though this was used in the film to characterize Belle as strange and served to separate her from the other villagers.

Mixed gender messages were prevalent in *Aladdin*. The prince frequently displayed emotion and was sensitive and helpful, attributes traditionally associated with femininity.

However, he was also highly assertive, physically strong and gave a great deal of advice, compared to the princess. Similarly, the princess was both assertive and fearful. Stereotyped gender roles persist in how she was shown frequently as physically weak, highly affectionate, and troublesome. In addition, the princess uses overt sexuality and exaggerated femininity in order to aid in Aladdin's rescue. In contrast, later princesses such as Mulan and Pocahontas use intellect and physical strength in their rescuing strategies.

Pocahontas and *Mulan* presented very contradictory gendered messages as well. The princes were two of the most "masculine" princes represented in the Disney Princess movies: they were unemotionally stoic, physically strong, assertive, athletic, and were shown as leaders more than any other princes. The princess in *Mulan* was more athletic than the prince whereas the princess in *Pocahontas* was almost as athletic but not nearly as physically strong as the prince. In *Mulan* the princess was sensitive and submissive, and both princesses were highly tentative and troublesome, suggesting traditionally feminine roles. Further, much of the troublesome nature of the princesses related to their undertaking of more masculine roles and pursuing non-traditional paths in the movies such as bravely taking leadership roles and embarking on climactic adventures. Therefore, while the traditionally masculine traits increased for these princess characters, it was not necessarily presented as a positive characteristic of the princesses. The physical and behavioral characteristics of these ethnic princesses has been the focus of more detailed discussions of the depiction of race in these movies (Lacroix 2004; Ono and Buescher 2001).

The most current film, *The Princess and the Frog*, starred a princess who was highly affectionate, assertive, and athletic, and a prince who showed emotion frequently, was affectionate, and athletic. The princess clearly stated that a combination of dreaming and hard work will allow you to do anything you want, and this was an important theme of the movie. The movie portrayed a more androgynous prince and princess who were able to accomplish their dreams separately, and together, eventually culminating in a fulfilling romance. However, there are mixed gendered messages in this movie. For example, the prince rescues twice and is rescued three times, a non-traditional gender portrayal, but the princess rescues once and is rescued twice, a more traditional gender portrayal. In addition, perhaps the most distinctive aspect of this film in the Disney Princess line is that the princess character is Black and the movie concludes with an interracial marriage, though the social commentary this affords is beyond the scope of this study.

Overall, trends toward less gender-based stereotyping over time in the movies fluctuated greatly and the progress was not necessarily sequential. The princess in *Pocahontas*

(1995) was the most affectionate princess and the princess in *Mulan* (1998) was highly submissive, second only to *Cinderella* (1950). Having high rates of traditionally feminine behaviors displayed only by the female central characters in the most recent movies does not suggest progress towards gender equality. The middle and most current movies may indicate, however, that gender might be depicted less stereotypically in future movies, as attributes such as physical strength and actions like performing the powerful final rescue were more likely to be exhibited by these later princesses. Mixed messages are still present in later Disney Princess films, suggesting the importance of considering the interplay of these messages and the context of the movies as well as the simple increase in opposite-gender characteristics exhibited by the prince and princess characters.

Resolutions

The strongly gendered messages present in the resolutions of the movies help to reinforce the desirability of traditional gender conformity. Whereas the later princesses performed more active roles in the final rescues of the movies, the princes still performed most of the climatic rescues. A princess has not yet performed the final rescue without the involvement of the prince. Over time, the princesses' roles have changed, however, from being completely passive or even asleep during the final rescues in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Cinderella,* and *Sleeping Beauty*, to assisting the prince in *Pocahontas* and *Mulan.*

The princess always won the love of the prince by the end of the Disney Princess films, and this portrayal of romance provides a strongly gendered message. The child viewer is provided with consistent exposure to the social script that one falls in love either very quickly, at first sight (*Snow White, Sleeping Beauty*), against all odds (*Beauty and the Beast, Mulan, The Princess and the Frog*), or both (*Cinderella, The Little Mermaid, Aladdin, Pocahontas*). In *Aladdin*, the romance took 2 days to develop, and in *Pocahontas* it developed in 1 day (even though the characters spoke different languages!). In *Beauty and the Beast* the princess fell in love with a man who arguably was victimizing her. The romance in the two most recent films, *Mulan* and *The Princess and the Frog*, however, developed over time as the characters interacted with each other, often overcoming obstacles together and fostering a friendship as well. This suggests that the more recent Disney Princess movies show a more balanced portrayal of relationship formation. However, a heterosexual romance is inevitable and often a central conclusion of the movie. No princess remains single except for Pocahontas. Though she and her prince were separated, they were still romantically linked at the conclusion. Pocahontas chose the gender traditional resolution by staying with her family rather than embarking on an adventure with the person she loved.

Consistent with the romantic resolutions of the films, the princesses are frequently portrayed as idealized feminine figures. While individual movies used slightly different ways to depict this, as discussed throughout, each princess showcased her skills as a caretaker and mother, was conventionally beautiful, had or gained social power and wealth, and was adored by other characters. Her stereotypical actions and her compliance within the gendered system granted her many rewards, bestowed in the films' resolutions, and these strongly gendered messages help to reinforce the desirability of traditional gender conformity.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. In an effort to adhere to the clear definitions used in the coding process, many actions or mixed behaviors that required undue interpretation by the researchers were discarded, leaving more complex gendered behaviors unexamined. In addition, one of the researchers who coded also interpreted the results, leaving room for bias.

This study only examined the Disney Princess movie line specifically, which does not represent all Disney movies. It also only included analysis of the princess and prince characters and did not consider the gendered attributes of any other characters, of which there were many. It could not incorporate subtleties like animation techniques that may have enhanced the gender message. For example, lighting, music, and color can influence whether or not a female or male is portrayed as scary, such as via loud music and dark lighting, or as happy and pleasant, via soft music and sunny lighting.

To further enhance research on gender portrayal in children's media, it would be beneficial to increase the range of focus of the studies. Most studies on gender focus on traditional female stereotypes more than male stereotypes. This study shows the important role of the prince, however, and the princess-prince interactions. This study does not address questions about the interpretation of the content by the child viewer. Thus, the extrapolation of theories and previous research is the only way to support the idea that gender role portrayals may have effects on children. This study illustrates the gendered content available to the child viewer but does not investigate how children interpret and use the information.

Conclusion

The present study clearly demonstrates that there are both stereotypical and non-stereotypical gender role portrayals in

the Disney Princess movies. The gendered messages did not consistently move away from traditional themes in more recent movies. Whereas some movies showed a number of non-stereotypical gender qualities, all of the movies incorporated some stereotypical representations of gender. Both the male and female roles changed over time, but overall the male characters evinced less change than the female characters and were more androgynous throughout. The princess role retained its femininity over time, and was rewarded for that, but also expanded to incorporate some traditionally masculine characteristics.

The implications of this study are suggested by the theoretical perspectives that highlight the effects media exposure may have on gender acquisition. Both the cultivation theory and the constructivist approach support the idea that watching gendered content, such as that in the Disney Princess movies, may influence a child's gender development. These theoretical perspectives suggest that viewing depictions of gender roles contributes to a child's understanding of gender and that media exposure helps develop a child's concepts of social behavior and norms (Graves 1999; Martin et al. 2002). These social scripts, or constructions of gender norms, are present in the Disney Princess movies and have been shown in previous studies to influence the viewers' beliefs and actions (Eggermont 2006; Morr Serewicz and Gale 2008). Thus, the persistence of gender-based stereotypes in this media format is important (Giroux 1997; Lacroix 2004).

The goals of this project were to add to the understanding of the gendered content in the Disney Princess movies as well as to stimulate discussion regarding how this knowledge can be used to benefit positive gender development. As evidenced by the release of the most recent Disney Princess film, the Disney Princess line is a popular and current form of children's media (Disney Princess 2010). The impressive marketing power and international presence of the Disney Princess products ensures they will remain influential in the lives of children (Hubka et al. 2009; McRobbie 2008). The impact of the Disney Princess "phenomenon" on the lives of young girls is the focus of many discussions, and the quantitative results and subsequent implications of this study are intended to inform and promote further discourse (Do Rozario 2004; Orenstein 2006). Media targeted toward young children can serve as positive influences (Calvert and Huston 1987) and a means for addressing stereotypical gender roles (Leaper 2000). Disney can and may play an important role in fostering this growth and development in the future.

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