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English 1103

April 6, 2015

A Not-So Happily Ever After

Once upon a time, there lived a young girl living in a magnificent castle up on the hill in a kingdom far, far away. Skin as pale as snow and lips as red as roses with hair as gold as the sun, she is the most beautiful girl in the whole kingdom, loved by all—quiet, well-mannered, always doing as she is told. She does not speak for herself and instead relies on others to determine the course of her life. Her value is determined by her external beauty and not by the quality of her character, her heart, or her mind. She sits waiting for Prince Charming to come swooping in on a white horse as she hangs around singing to the birds, the furniture, or herself.

Now fast forward to a time not so long ago and a place no farther away than the living room, where a young girl watches these events play out in front of her on a 60-inch plasma screen and suddenly she is that princess in front of her. Such fantasies fill her mind as she takes her Cinderella crown, Snow White shoes, and Sleeping Beauty dress out of the toy chest. Being bombarded with movies, TV shows, cartoons, and advertisements of Disney princesses, young girls are exposed to these fantasy images on a daily basis. Girls like this begin to identify with a certain princess and aspire to follow the life of that character. From the time I was a young girl, my favorite princess was Sleeping Beauty. We shared the same fair skin and blonde hair, so naturally I wanted to be just like her. For my youngest sister Britta, it was Snow White and for my other sister Annika, it was Cinderella. By seeing ourselves in these princesses, we and other young girls are adopting the qualities that go along with each of these princesses, qualities that

are harshly stereotypical. Disney portrays its female characters through gender roles that are harmful to the developing minds of young children by presenting them as defined by their physical beauty, lacking in assertiveness, and limited by their racial backgrounds.

Physical beauty serves as a gender stereotype and central topic in Disney movies, as it defines female characters' worth. For example, in *Sleeping Beauty*, Aurora has lips red as the rose and hair full of sunshine; her waist in the movie is no wider than the diameter of her wrists. For adults, these qualities resonate as an idealistic view of bodily perfection that can only be created with a pencil and paper. However, younger girls fail to recognize that the images on their screens are not reality, potentially leading to disastrous body image issues. Dr. Tony Paulson, a Sacramento State University professor of Family and Consumer Sciences and expert in the field of eating disorders for over 25 years, highlighted images of Disney princesses in a presentation at Sacramento State University. These images of certain princesses were used to display how women from a young age feel pressure to live up to those standards (Maguire). In the article "Improving Body Image Can Be Beneficial to One's Health," Brandie Maguire reports "'The thin ideal is the culprit of negative body image,' said Paulson. 'We're creating more body image [issues] because we are hyper focused on weight'" (qtd. in Maguire). This societal obsession with body image is especially dangerous to the younger generations, who are exposed to these princess bodies at an early age, leading them to believe that in order to be worthy, they have to be a size double zero, tall, trim, and beautiful. This is alarming as researchers from Common Sense Media, an organization that promotes safe use of technology and media for families, have found that children as young as age five have expressed concerns about their body image. This research, CNN's Kelly Wallace reports, suggests "more than half of girls and one-third of boys as young as 6 to 8 think their ideal weight is thinner than their current size" (Wallace). Out of all

the Disney princess films, there is not one princess who is anywhere close to the proportions of the average American woman, appearing closer to a size zero than the national average of fourteen. With such an expansive social issue targeting a wide range of individuals, a large media presence by Disney princesses is giving young girls more exposure to these dangerous body stereotypes, which can be associated with females' negative perspective of overall value in their own minds as well as in society in general.

In conjunction with the idea that a smaller external appearance makes a young girl more attractive and princess-like, Disney movies have also engrained the notion that beauty is equivalent to a character's level of goodness, thereby representing ugly characters in "bad guy" roles. One of the most prevalent examples of this is in the Disney production of *Cinderella*, where the "evil stepsisters" are portrayed as rude, mean, awkward, and physically ugly compared to the naïve, well-mannered, and beautiful protagonist, Cinderella. Disney movies such as these give children a basis to begin to associate an uglier external appearance with an ugly internal character. This idea is verified by the findings presented in the article "Do Animated Disney Characters Portray and Promote the Beauty-Goodness Stereotype?" published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* by researchers at Appalachian State University and the University of North Carolina Pembroke. After analyzing several classic Disney princess films for their representation of male and female characters based on certain qualities, these researchers report, "central characters were portrayed more favorably with regard to goodness and were generally rated as more physically attractive than were secondary or peripheral characters across films" (Bazzini et al. 2696). Now this may not seem as detrimental in the context of movies, but in everyday life, this association between looks and character creates a framework for childhood bullying. The kid in an elementary school class that may be bigger, less attractive, or awkward is deemed the social

outcast, or someone no one wishes to associate with. This concept has its roots in psychology, as found by Judith Langlois' research referenced in the study above. Langlois, a developmental psychologist and the founder of the Langlois Social Development Lab at the University of Texas at Austin, studied how older children reacted to photographs of attractive and unattractive people. Through her research, she discovered "across racial groups, the attractive photographs were judged more favorably on assessments of sharing, friendliness, smartness, and other skills, as compared to the unattractive photographs" (qtd. in Bazini et al. 2699). When my sisters and I were envisioning ourselves as our favorite princesses, the qualities they encompassed defined the way in which we acted and how we viewed those around us. Therefore when we saw our neighbor, a much larger, taller, and less attractive boy from down the street, we associated him with being mean and wanting to steal our toys, like the villain in Disney films. However, when we saw our younger, gentler, and more beautiful neighbor, we associated her looks with the kindness and compassion of a Disney princess. Just as I did as a child, younger children may take the roles assigned in Disney movies to determine the personal quality of individuals, developing a judgmental environment for adolescents.

Female passivity is another common theme shown through the Disney princess film collection, which exemplifies gender stereotypes for female characters. In the earliest Disney princess movies, *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, the princesses "were frequently affectionate, helpful, troublesome, fearful, tentative, and described as pretty" (England et al. 556). This information comes from a study headed by Dawn Elizabeth England from the Department of Family and Human Development at Arizona State University, Lara Descartes with the Division of Social Science and Family Studies at Brescia University College in Ontario, and Melissa Collier-Meek from the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of

Connecticut. The study aimed to analyze the way female characters are presented in Disney princess films, and in the area of passivity, the researchers concluded that even though princesses displayed assertiveness more often than male characters, “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” (England et al. 562). Princesses in these films lacked the confidence to assert themselves in interactions with other characters, particularly males or females of elevated status. Even in situations of peril, the princesses sat cowering in the corner or crying for help, not able to take a stand when their own lives were in danger.

Furthermore, the passivity of female characters can be seen through the songs various characters sing such as “Someday My Prince Will Come” from *Snow White*, where the events in her life are all contingent on the day that a prince finally appears. Princess Aurora of *Sleeping Beauty* sings a song to the birds called “I Wonder” in which the title character questions when her handsome prince will sing a love song to her. Both of these princesses are waiting for their futures to come knocking on their doors instead of taking initiative or control of their lives. Based on the Disney princess collection used in “Gender Role Portrayal and Disney Princesses,” 9.71% of all male behaviors were seen as being physically strong, whereas females only displayed strength in 2.14% out of their total behaviors (England et al. 561). However, with the recent release of the movie *Brave*, Disney was acclaimed for showing a more progressive image of female strength. Mary Pols, a graduate of Duke University and University of California Berkley’s School of Journalism, has crafted several movie reviews for *Time Magazine*, including an article on *Brave*. The main character, Merida, would rather be out riding horses than live up to

her royal duties. Whereas this movie portrays an unconventional view of the generally accepted vision of a princess, the movie still falls short. In her review, “Why Pixar’s *Brave* is a Failure of Female Empowerment,” Pols writes, “Merida is strong, capable and courageous. But depressingly, she’s a princess, the most traditional role for female characters in children’s fictions. She’s a rebellious tomboy, but her concerns are still limited to those of a princess, the biggest of which remains, as ever, marriage.” Merida is still wrapped up in the world of royalty and beauty, making her character progression across the movie fall short of being noteworthy enough to revolutionize the idea of strong feminine characters. Pols argues, “Merida doesn’t really grow. She’s simply extended her time as a tomboy, another archetype, less a girl than a stereotype of a kind of girl.” Although attempts have been made to move away from the stereotypical weak female role in Disney movies, not even movies like *Brave* are enough to break the mold that Disney females are placed into.

The lack of diversity in Disney princesses also gives young viewers a stereotypical racial viewpoint to aspire to be. Children of color grow up in a world of beautiful white princess characters, making it difficult for these children to identify with this piece of childhood. Here at school, my roommate is Cuban; she has dark hair, dark eyes, and tan skin. Growing up, there was no princess she could identify with or look to in which she saw herself. I had never considered this, as Cinderella shared my blonde hair, light skin, and blue eyes. Over the years, Disney has made attempts to break racial divides with princesses such as Mulan, Pocahontas, and Tiana. When looking closer at the movie *Pocahontas*, however, viewers can see that the appearances of Pocahontas and other Native American figures in the film do not match the authentic appearance of these people. The creators and animators of this film even go as far as saying that in the design process of *Pocahontas*, “they started with Native American faces but eventually gravitated to the

more familiar and Anglicized looks of the statuesque [Christy] Turlington” (Edgerton and Jackson). In essence, Pocahontas was drawn to be the “white version” of a Native American, which counteracts the entire movie’s central theme of racial tolerance. One of Disney’s more recent films, *The Princess and the Frog*, depicts the story of Tiana, the only African-American princess in the Disney collection. However, for most of the movie, Tiana is a frog, meaning that her race is indistinguishable, wasting the racial breakthrough moment for Disney. In an article from the *Journal of African American Studies*, Ajay Gehlawat discusses the use of African-American characters in the Disney film *The Princess and the Frog*, pointing out that Tiana’s mother is presented as a seamstress, a typical role of working-class African-American women in American history. Gehlawat suggests, “This social position also reflects the contemporary reality of the ‘Mammy’ role that many African-American women were forced to play, both on- and off-screen” (Gehlawat 420). In doing this, Disney has further placed its African-American female characters in stereotypical racial roles, limiting their opportunity to take a stance on diversity and social issues in their films.

The remaining princesses are all Caucasian, fair-skinned females, seen most recently with Disney’s release of *Frozen*. In terms of female passivity, *Frozen* serves as a strong example of Disney moving away from such weak female characters. Elsa is brave and assertive, and it is her own powers that are able to save her sister in the end. However, what it gains for female empowerment, the film still loses in terms of racial diversity. Although there was an opportunity to portray them as different races and aid the development of Disney princess variation, Elsa and Anna are both fair-skinned (Grammar). As the film takes place in Sweden, Anna and Elsa’s appearances accurately represent the historically white, light-skinned, blonde hair, and blue-eyed population of this area. However, there is no reason why the story could have been set in another

location, where incorporating different races into the storyline would be more logical. A film where an African queen had some hidden power that could change the lives of those around her, or a queen of Hispanic, Latino, or Indian descent could allow Disney to finally dive over the racial barriers it has so gingerly waltzed around. The lack of different races, ethnicities, and cultures represented in Disney princess films are damaging to the minds of children who are searching for their own “happily ever after.”

Happily ever after—it’s an interesting idea, is it not? The young girl meets her prince, he declares his love for her, and they ride off into the sunset to their future. Disney only offers the idea that without a prince, the princess fails to reach her happily ever after. The idea of being a princess is enchanting for most girls, but we should be putting less pressure on girls to be princesses and instead encourage them to be women without falling into society’s established gender roles. Being a woman is about more than finding Prince Charming. Women are capable of more than just cleaning, singing, and sitting pretty. Young girls should be watching female characters leading companies, becoming president, doctors, lawyers, or achieving other positions of power. Disney movies have the opportunity to revolutionize the media by redefining female characters into more than princesses. It is time for young girls and women to stop waiting for dreams and start chasing them, breaking through the stereotypical gender roles children’s media so foolishly assigns them. Real women are not defined by their level of beauty, they are not weak or timid, and are not restricted by race or ethnicity. It is time for Disney to recognize this and react accordingly so future generations of girls can grow up watching strong, female characters on their screens instead of being royally misled.

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