

# **Disney and Children's Perception of Gender Roles and Expectations**

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## **Chapter 1 - Introduction**

The aim of this article is to examine the role Disney may play in contributing to children's early understandings of gender identity. Rather than relying upon adult perceptions or using conventional data collection methods to gather children's views, a creative participatory approach is used to capture children's views and lived experiences. This topic is worthy of consideration as gender is socially constructed which suggests certain behaviours each sex is expected to portray (Putri, 2017). Gender stereotypes have many negative outcomes, preventing children from participating in what they enjoy due to expectations to conform. With regards to early years settings, it is essential that practitioners encourage children to accept and respect all individuals, no matter their gender or whether they 'fit in' with society's expectations. This article is based on research 'with' children not 'on' children to reduce the adult-child power imbalance and to provide children more ownership of their views and experiences as they are the experts within their own lives (Roberts-Holmes, 2018).

## **Chapter 2- Literature**

Before examining the influence of Disney on young children's understanding of gender, it is important to consider how children develop gendered identities, attitudes and behaviours. Theories tend to fall into two domains - biological and sociological (the 'nature or nurture' debate). Although there is not room within this article to explore this in any depth, some consideration will be given to social learning theories due to the focus of the study.

Social learning theories claim that boys/men and girls/women, and ideas of masculinity and femininity, are the result of culture and society. According to gender schema theory (Bem 1981, 1983), social agents deliver rules and cues to children as to what it means to be a 'girl' or a 'boy' (Soylemez, 2010), promoting gender-based schemas in young children. Mass media, including children's film and literature, is a particularly powerful socializing agent as it constantly transmits deeply embedded cultural norms relating to gender (Spinner et al 2018). Judith Butler extends the social learning theory through her concept of 'performativity' (she also applies her theory to sexuality). She asserts that gendering starts from birth when infants are expected to 'perform' and construct their gender in line with what is socially expected of what it means to be female or male (Duignan, 2020). These performances happen so often, it may suggest the idea that gender is biologically determined (Hamilton, 2021). However, post-structuralist theory argues that attention needs to be given to power relations, the fluidity of identity, children's agency and intersectionality. Although many children adopt behaviour that follow traditional gender norms, some ignore or reject certain aspects of masculinities or femininities (Hamilton, 2021).

In many western countries, Disney is one of the most popular sources of media involved in children's everyday lives. Although many parents see the Disney as a safe source of entertainment, it could result in children creating stereotypical views. Guo (2016) argues that princess movies reinforce traditional female stereotypes. Within the older princess movies such as Snow White, Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty, the women continuously cook, clean and await rescue from a male. Studies indicate that many young girls watch these movies repetitively and are influenced by the princesses (Golden and Jacoby, 2018). Girls who watch these movies tend to enjoy traditional activities, put less effort into challenging tasks and compare themselves to the unrealistic body image of the princesses (Dinella et al, 2014; Coyne, et al 2016). Disney have started to create more princess movies such as Mulan and Brave, where females are independent and participate in activities which may be seen stereotypically as a male's role. However, Islam and Akter (2020) argue gender stereotypes are still intimated throughout many new films. Whilst analysing the effects Disney may have on girls, it is as equally important to consider the impact it may have on young boys. In *Beauty and the Beast*, Gaston a key character, continually refers to how well built he is. Messages like this could result in young boys feeling they have to be largely built to be able to be called a 'man' or to impress people. Research suggests that within media there is a relationship between males being larger, stronger, taller and being more popular (González et al, 2020). This is portrayed by Disney characters such as Maui, Tarzan and Hercules. González et al (2020) assert that males shown in this way creates a negative body image for boys and contributes to gender stereotypes.

Disney characters have exposed children to negative body image (Golden and Jacoby, 2018). Due to Disney's high standard in appearance of their heroes and heroines, many girls feel a pressure to be kind and caring to others, to be a certain weight and to please people by acting in a certain manner (Golden and Jacoby, 2018; Guo, 2016). If skills and accomplishments are highlighted rather than the character's looks, children may be more determined to achieve academically instead of focusing on how others judge them physically (Guo, 2016). Research suggests Disney still contains sexist views and outdated traditions (Guo, 2016; Mouzakis, 2020). Kurniawati (2020) claims that even in the newer princess movie *Brave*, Merida's appearance is still very feminine despite Disney's efforts to challenge the 'normality' of their previous princess

stories. Guo (2016) discovered that throughout most Disney princess films and literature 55% of comments which the princesses receive are focussed on their looks and only 11% are about their achievements. Although there is more Disney could do to challenge appearances and attributes of the main characters, Mouzakis (2020) states that the newer princesses could be seen as a good example for young girls as they go against their parents will, normally the father, to follow their own destiny, breaking down traditional 'norms'. This is shown in films such as, Moana, The Little Mermaid, Brave and Mulan.

Children's media and literature play a major impact in the views children have (Coyne et al, 2016). What humans learn and experience throughout their childhood will have an impact on their future (Bourdieu, 2017). Disney may be working towards changing stereotypical traditions but original movies including Snow White, Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty, are still very popular amongst the younger generation (Golden and Jacoby, 2018).

## **Chapter 3 - Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The research adopted a qualitative stance as the aim of the study is to examine children's perceptions of Disney characters and whether they have any gender stereotypes. Being interested in the shift away from research 'on' or 'about' children towards ideology which recognises that children are experts on their own lives (Bolshaw and Josephidou 2019), an arts-based educational research (ABER) approach was selected. As with the participatory Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss, 2011), ABER can help to elicit the many diverse voices of children, balance the power relationship between the child and adult researcher (Canosa et al, 2018), while also enabling children to express their lived experiences in a way which is more familiar, playful, enjoyable and worthwhile to them (Harris and Manatakis, 2013; Barton, 2015).

The research was undertaken in one primary school located in a low socio-economic status area in North-West England. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic the number of children attending the school was limited, resulting in mixed age classes and, decreasing the number of children available. In total eight children, aged five to eight years old, all white British, were involved in the study (four boys and four girls).

### **Data Collection**

Before working with the children, they were informed that the activities were designed to explore some of their favourite Disney characters and that there were no right or wrong answers. The two approaches used to collect data were 'draw and talk' and an 'image-values line' and a written narrative of children's comments. They were asked if they had any questions before each activity began. By doing this the children were made aware that the research intentions were to work 'with' them not 'on' them (Alderson and Morrow, 2020).

Okada and Ishibashi (2017) demonstrate that when children are asked to draw on their own a more subjective piece of work is created, as when drawing around others, some children may feel encouraged to use other's work as inspiration. This could also apply to opinions shared during group discussion; some children may mirror the answers of others (Powell and Smith, 2017), or even learn the stereotypes which other children hold. Thus, the decision was made to conduct the activities on an individual basis to ensure that the children could express their own views and drawings without the influence of others, whilst also giving quieter children an opportunity to express their opinions.

For the draw and talk exercise, each child was provided with paper and pens and asked to draw their favourite Disney character. A discussion then took place with previously prepared open-ended questions in a way which fit into the conversation taking place. Questions were based around why the character was their favourite, what they do within the movie/story which influences this choice and whether they would still have the same thoughts about the character if they were the opposite gender. Noonan et al (2016) encourage 'draw and tell', asserting that this open method, where children are free to discuss their drawing, allows children to put across their personal views and opinions, rather than the views of adults. However, Lyon and Carabelli (2016) state although artwork may empower children and put them at ease, 'non-artistic' children may feel uncomfortable or dismissive with the task.

For the second activity the children were provided with twelve picture cards of Disney characters: six male characters and six female characters, from modern and original Disney films. The children were asked to use an image-value line (numbers 1 to 12) to rate the characters from their favourite to their least favourite. This activity followed with a discussion to explore why the children had put the characters in this order, concepts within the film/story which cause them to make this decision and whether they would place the characters in a different order if they were the opposite gender. Visual methods and fun, interactive activities often make children more responsive and,

the conversations held more detailed (Nyumba et al, 2018), resulting in more reliable results (Bakar et al, 2016).

### **Ethics**

An information and participant consent form which included a description of the research, what the children would be asked to do and their rights, were given to the class teacher. The researcher asked if the forms should be distributed to parents, but due to the nature of the study the teacher did not feel this to be necessary, as there were no obvious factors which would cause the children harm. However, the British Educational Research Association (2018: p.15) advises that where an individual's age or circumstance may limit the extent to which they 'understand or agree voluntarily to participate' the researcher should 'explore ways in which they can be supported to participate with assent'. Thus, before undertaking the exercises with the children, a verbal explanation was given outlining the purpose of the research, and continuous checks were made to ensure that the children knew they could withdraw at any point and had the right to decline any questions asked.

To maintain other ethical concerns, the activities were conducted in the same room as teachers to ensure the safeguarding of the children. With regards to the drawings produced by the children it was only ethically right that they had ownership of their data. Children were asked what they would like to do with their drawing and were not made to feel under any obligation to leave their work with the researcher. Anonymity and confidentiality have been maintained by referring to the children as 'Girl 1', 'Boy 1'. Once data was collected it was kept in a password-protected computer to ensure that any information given was secure.

### **Limitations**

There are some limitations which may question the validity of research outcomes. The first factor to consider is an unfamiliar face working with the children. When an unfamiliar face visits a setting, many children may act differently causing inconsistencies (Powell and Smith, 2017).

One of the main disadvantages was due to Covid-19. As most of the children were taking part within online learning, it meant that there were not many children left in the school to complete the activity with. For the age group the study was aimed at, there were only four boys available, meaning only four girls could also be selected, reducing the size of the group to eight children.

Using artwork may have caused limitations. Children who feel they lack art skills may have worried or felt pessimistic (Blaisdell et al, 2019), negatively impacting on their views.

Recording everything the children said during the activities was challenging to do by hand and the children would sometimes have to repeat themselves. Using a digital recorder or video may have allowed more opportunity to observe the child throughout the activity, not only what they said, but the way they acted too.

### **Analysis**

Once data had been collected it was coded to categorise themes which occurred across the discussion, artwork and image-value line. The technique included scrutinising the data by arranging it into a systematic order (Chen et al, 2018); a process of segregation, comparing and grouping, which led to themes (Saldana, 2021). These themes were then compared to academic theories and published literature.

## Chapter 4 - Findings and Discussion

The results which follow are based on the views of eight children (four boys and four girls aged five to eight years old) who took part in two activities based on Disney characters i) a draw and tell activity ii) an image-value line activity where the children were given twelve characters to order from their favourite to their least, followed by an informal discussion.

It should be noted, all the boys decided to draw a male character whereas all the girls drew a female character. As some of the children wanted to keep their drawings and no cameras were allowed in the school only four drawings can be presented. During analysis two themes emerged i) the characters' physical appearances and ii) characteristics and behaviours.

### Appearance

Throughout both activities, all children constantly referred to the characters' appearances (hair, physical shape, clothing, colours worn). For the girls, hair was one of their favourite features about Disney characters. Girl 1 drew Rapunzel as her favourite character and her friend Pascal who is portrayed as a male. When asked what happened to Rapunzel Girl 1 replied: *"The witch cut off her beautiful long blonde hair. She looked better when she had long magical hair and was sad when it was cut off as it turns brown and short"*.



Figure 1 Belle - Girl 4



Figure 2 Ariel - Girl 2

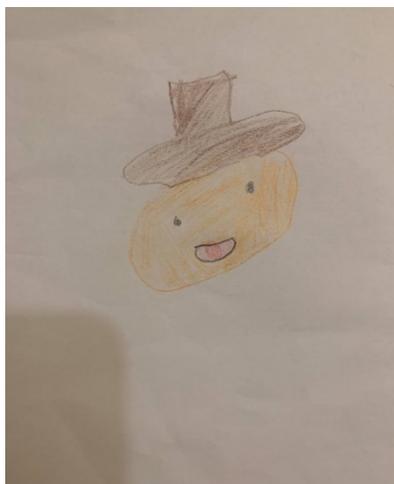


Figure 3 – Boy 2



Figure 4 - Boy 3

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When drawing Pascal, she did not include eyelashes but did include them on Rapunzel. *“Are you going to put some eyelashes on Pascal?”* she was asked, *“No because he’s a boy”* she replied, implying that as a male he cannot have eyelashes due to society associating long eyelashes as a feminine trait.

During the second activity, Girl 2 put all princesses at the front of the value line except from Snow White, when asked *“What is it about the other princesses that make them better?”* she replied, *“Because they have long hair, pretty dresses, better patterns. I don’t like Snow Whites short hair”*. Girl 1 and Girl 2 implied that having long hair over short hair was important, which could suggest they see short hair as a negative factor. In contrast, the boys did not include hair on their characters. This may link to Bem’s (1981) gender schema which indicates that by the age of two children recognise physical appearances and categorise these appearances to fit into a specific gender.

It seems that clothing influences children’s perceptions of gender. For example, Girl 2 justified putting Snow White last due to the ‘yellow and blue’ clothes she wore. When asking Girl 1 why Rapunzel was her favourite character she replied, *“She has a pretty purple dress”* and when asking Girl 4 why she disliked Wreck-It Ralph she replied, *“Because he wears dirty clothes”*. Research suggests that many companies use certain colours to attract specific genders (Hess and Melnyk, 2016). Therefore, Disney might use the colours of the clothes which the characters wear to appeal to a certain gender.

The children were asked if the character would look different if they were the opposite sex and whether they would still like/dislike them. Most children mentioned how they would wear different clothes. During the second activity Girl 2 contradicted herself when talking about Cinderella. She was asked *“Would she still be your favourite if she was a boy?”* She replied, *“Yes, because of the dress”*. Then when asked if she would look any different, she said *“Yeah, because she wouldn’t have a dress, long hair, lipstick or any money”*. When Girl 3 was asked if Elsa would still be her favourite character if she was a boy, she replied *“No, she wears high heels.”* When asked *“Can boys wear high heels?”* she replied *“No, boys don’t do that”*. These statements and the drawings imply that Disney’s characters clothing portray traditional stereotypes, as most of the females wear dresses and only wear trousers when dressing ‘like a man’ as shown in Mulan (Murnen et al, 2016). Studies undertaken by Birner (2016) and Block (2019) suggest many pre-school children believe only females can wear dresses and show concern when they see a male or a girl with short hair wearing a dress.

Baker et al (2016) assert many children believe that having an interest in fashion is associated with a female trait. If a male were to wear a dress or focus on clothing, then they may be regarded as ‘queer’. Within the study only one boy discussed clothing whereas all the girls mentioned it. Similarly, only Boy 3 included detailed clothing onto his drawing whereas all the girls included princess dresses.

Aladdin, who is physically smaller than the rest of the male Disney characters, was placed last in the children’s value lines. The children did not have much to say about Aladdin’s his appearance, but his characteristics were discussed by the boys (examined in the next theme). Alternatively, one male character who was popular amongst the boys and girls was Wreck-It Ralph. Only one child did not like him, the rest all brought him up into conversation or placed him at the beginning of the value line. When asked why he was popular, five out of the eight children mentioned how largely built he was. When asked *“What would Wreck-It Ralph be like if he was a girl?”* the children replied:

Boy 2 - *"He would be polite but not strong"*.

Boy 3 - *"He would have muscles, but they wouldn't be as big"*.

Boy 4 - *"Way different, he would look tiny and small"*.

Girl 1 - *"I wouldn't like him because he would be a strong girl with big hands"*.

These comments suggest that the children believe women cannot be as physically big or as strong as a man. This was also found by Brown and Stone (2016) who assert that women who are athletic tend to be targets of harassment or homophobic comments. Kavoura and Kokkonen (2020) support this, claiming women within the sport industry are often labelled as lesbians due to them not physically conforming in the traditional gender expectations.

### **Characteristics and Behaviours**

Children's reasoning for liking the characters also depended on ways they acted. Stereotypically the boys disliked the princesses. They described them as *"clumsy"*, *"boring"*, *"polite"*, *"submissive"* *"dozy"* and *"weak"*. Boy 2 said *"There are too many of them and the things that happen to them are all the same"*. In contrast the girls liked the princesses as they *"sing really good"* (Girl 2) and *are rescued by a prince* (Girl 1). Behaviours which the children associated with males were *"fast"*, *"brave"*, *"aggressive"* and *"funny"*. One stereotypical characteristic was linked to voices, men having a lower tone whilst females have a higher tone. Children felt that if the characters were to change sex then they would change their tone of voice. This is an important factor to be addressed as within modern society there are now transgender and non-binary individuals.

From the children's responses, it is apparent that powerful gender roles are represented throughout many Disney storylines related to what women are expected to do: sing songs, wait around to be rescued by a male, lack personality and independence. Resene (2017) states how in many Disney movies the men are at work whilst the women dance and sing. This could give children an unrealistic view of gender expectations and may also relate singing as a female activity. Moreover, boys who may want to sing may be faced with homophobic comments. Reilly and Barry (2020) highlight the impact of discrimination upon males who cross the gender divide and how they may face violence due to what they wear or the way in which they act.

Whitfield (2017) argues that instead of being concerned about who sings, the focus should be on what is being sung. During one song in *Mulan* an army commander sings about how he is unsatisfied with the men he has been sent and describes them as daughters instead of sons. It also states how challenging physical activities must be achieved to be a worthy man. In *Cinderella*, the mice repeatedly mention Cinderella's beauty implying that being the most beautiful is a state of importance. In one of the songs a male mouse is not allowed to help with the sewing because he is a male.

Both the girls and boys agreed that *Mulan*, *Merida* and *Moana* were all different to the rest of the princesses. Girl 3 swapped *Cinderella* and *Mulan* around in the value line (putting *Mulan* near the front), when asked for her reasoning behind the change she replied, *"Because Mulan is brave and she's different from the other princesses"*. Boy 1 said, *"Princess are boring, but I like Moana because of the story on the boat"*. Boy 2 said, *"I don't like princesses they all like castles, but I like Moana because she's different"*.

Salden (2019) claims that these three princesses are a breakthrough for Disney, the beginning of presenting women as strong individuals. Mulan starts off by portraying traditional stereotypes as she goes with a full face of make-up in feminine clothes to visit a match maker to find a husband. However, she is not interested in the match maker, but instead her goals are to make her family proud. With this attitude Shehatta (2020) suggests Disney is showing girls that they can be who they wish to be and do not have to follow gender norms. This also relates to the character Brave. However, Streiff and Dundes (2017) argue that Disney still has a long way to go, using Moana as an example. Moana goes on a journey to find her independence against her father's wishes. Her companion Maui has a stereotypical masculine figure and anxieties about Moana's abilities. Although Moana is a strong heroine some elements of the storyline contain stereotypical similarities to the other Disney princesses (Streiff and Dundes, 2017).

Another stereotype involved Lightning McQueen from Cars. All the girls placed Lightning McQueen near, or at the end, of the value line stating:

Girl 1 - *"Because he's a boy and my brother like's cars"*.

Girl 2 - *"I don't like him because it's about cars"*.

Girl 3 - *"I don't like cars, they're for boys"*.

Most of the boys, however, liked Lightning McQueen and placed him near the front line. Comments included: "I like Lightning McQueen because he's a fast car". (Boy 3) and "Cars are for boys, like mechanics are all boys, only a few girls do this" (Boy 4). Boy 4 suggests he mainly sees this as a job for men. Alfaro et al (2017) and GoldieBlox (2017) claim only 14% of engineers globally are women whereas men represent 86%, suggesting this is due to the toys and literature accessed during childhood. Baker et al (2016) found that 58% of boys believed both genders could be engineers/mechanics but only 35% of girls agreed with this.

Finally, Aladdin was the least liked male character. Slenderly built, Nope (2016) describes him as having "new male" characteristics, where men are sensitive and romantic, rather than traditional traits such as strength and dominance. However, even when stereotypes are challenged, some children might see traits as unusual or negative. For example, placing Aladdin at the end of the value line Boy 1 explained, *"Haven't watched it much, think he falls off a magic carpet"*. This comment could imply Aladdin is seen as weak and monotonous. Boy 2 compared Aladdin against the other male characters, placing him last "All the princesses live in castles, only Aladdin lives in a castle".

## Chapter 5- Conclusion

It seems that despite Disney's efforts to overcome sexist and outdated views, new storylines still include gender expectations relating to the appearances and actions of the characters. As discussed, children learn society's gender expectations from a young age, from many aspects of culture, Disney being a key factor. With regards to the research questions, it seems children do hold strong stereotypes concerning the appearance, characteristics and behaviours expected of male and female characters. This highlights the importance of monitoring and breaking down traditional stereotypes within popular children's culture such as Disney. Rather than fearing or ignoring Disney movies and literature, it highlights the importance of parents and practitioners monitoring and challenging traditional norms by exploring the negative impact of gender stereotypes with young children. A similar study could be undertaken exploring gender and sexuality as it was apparent many children had stereotypical views about Aladdin appearing more feminine than the other males.

The children involved in the study, show just how much young people may open-up to disclose their views and experiences, when a fun and participatory data collection method is adopted and, the topic is attractive to them.

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# Disney and Children's Perception of Gender Roles and Expectations

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