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Images of Couples and Families in Disney Feature-Length Animated Films

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Private practice

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Media have the potential to serve as sources of information regarding couples and families for many children. One of the more popular forms of children's media is the Disney animated feature-length movie. To date, no research has examined images of couples and families in a wide sampling of Disney feature-length animated films. This study was designed to identify themes about couples and families portrayed in 26 Disney animated classics and recently released movies. In general, four overarching themes were identified: (a) family relationships are a strong priority, (b) families are diverse, but the diversity is often simplified, (c) fathers are elevated, while mothers are marginalized, and (d) couple relationships are created by "love at first sight," are easily maintained, and are often characterized by gender-based power differentials. Clinical implications for family professionals are addressed.

How do children gain information about couples and families? First and foremost, they learn by observing and participating in their own families. However, families do not exist in vacuums, and familial interactions are clearly not children's only source of information about family relationships. Media are other sources from which children gain information about their world, including couples and families. As Drotner (2001) argued, "Young people use various forms of media to negotiate who they are and what the world is like" (p. 301). Children often make use of popular stories, myths, and fairy tales to make sense of themselves and their surroundings (Corsaro, 1997;

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Wolf & Heath, 1992). This may be particularly true for children who are not provided with sufficient information about how to cope with emotional and social needs. Gunter and McAleer (1997) found that these children look to fulfill these needs in alternative ways, including television. As such, these researchers suggest that television may have a more significant role in these children's "schooling in life" (p. 21).

Because media are sources of this social education for children, it is important for parents to actively participate in children's consumption of media images. In order to do this effectively, parents need to learn what kinds of messages the media are transmitting, and how to discuss these messages with their children. Since parents may seek advice from family professionals in learning how to critically analyze and discuss media with their children, family therapists ideally need to be familiar with the social messages contained in children's media and how these messages may inform family member's understanding of themselves and their relationships.

The Disney Corporation is a major contributor to most avenues of children's media. To date, the Disney Corporation owns a major television network, cable television networks, and radio stations. Disney also develops children's books, cartoons, movies, videos, computer software and games, as well as many other products designed for children's use including backpacks, lunch boxes, and clothing. One of the more popular forms of Disney media is the feature-length animated film. Family relationships tend to be major themes in these movies. Indeed, family relationships are often central to the plot and story line, and films that present family members who are not central to the story are by far the exception in Disney animated films. Feature-length animated films are the oldest form of Disney media. As such, they are also some of the few forms of children's media that can be shared intergenerationally. A strong potential exists that Disney feature-length animated films are a part of most children's lives in the United States; therefore, media produced by Disney and in particular the animated film are an important starting place when considering the content of children's media.

Disney animated films have been the topic of recent research and analysis (Arcus, 1989; Beres, 1999; Beveridge, 1996; Dundes, 2001; Godding-Williams, 1995; Martin-Rodriguez, 2000; Palmer, 2000; Tseelon, 1995; Wiersma, 2001). Most research has examined one movie for specific issues; only three known studies examined more than one of the Disney animated movies (Arcus, 1989; Beveridge, 1996; Wiersma, 2001). Topics of research have included gender-related analysis (Beres, 1999; Dundes, 2001; Tseelon, 1995; Wiersma, 2001), cultural, racial, and ethnic analysis (Gooding-Williams, 1995; Martin-Rodriguez, 2000; Palmer, 2000), character illustrations (Arcus, 1989), and representations of mental illness (Beveridge, 1996).

A significant amount of research on Disney animated films has examined the films in relation to gender images and themes. Wiersma (2001) sampled 16 movies and found that gender images contained in these movies have not changed dramatically since the release of *Snow White* in 1937. She

also found that images tend to be gender stereotyped. Dundes's (2001) analysis of *Pocahontas* revealed similar findings, as she suggested that representations of women have not changed in recent movies, they have only become disguised. Beres (1999) not only found that gender stereotyped images are portrayed, but that men's control over and abuse of women is romanticized. Analysis of *The Little Mermaid* revealed a tendency to oversimplify the original myth on which the movie was based and to exaggerate the idea of romantic love (Tseelon, 1995).

This study is designed to identify the prominent themes about family relationships in Disney feature-length animated films. With this information, family therapists can help parents act as mediators, reinforcing themes parents agree with and presenting alternatives to themes they do not. The findings of this study also can help family therapists in working with children to better understand the kinds of messages children may potentially be using to make sense of their family and themselves.

METHOD

Sample

A thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) was performed on a selected group of 26 feature-length Disney animated movies. Using purposive sampling, movies were selected that are most commonly watched by children today, and are among the more popular or most watched movies among multiple generations of Disney viewers (see Table 1 for the movies analyzed). The movies were chosen based on their inclusion in the category of Disney Classics, as well as recent movies released in theaters not yet deemed classics. From this group, additional selection criteria were used including movies released in theaters for the first time after 1990; movies reissued to theaters more than once; and movies rated in the top 10 animated films, top 25 movies, or top 10 musicals in Disney's "100 years of magic survey." The movies selected represent those with either sustained or current popularity. The movies will be referenced by easily recognized one-word abbreviations.

Data analysis was conducted in two phases. First, a template was developed in the form of codes, or questions, to organize the indexing of material (Crabtree & Miller, 1992; Seidel & Kelle, 1995). These codes were organized into three broad categories: families, parents, and couples. Within each of these broad categories were the following codes or questions: (a) Which persons are present within this category? For example, what persons comprise a family? (b) How is this category created? For example, how are families created? (c) How do persons relate to maintain the relationships in this category? (d) What is the nature of persons in this category? For example, what is the nature of specific family members?

Relevant material was indexed into these codes. The movies were observed and detailed information was recorded that was relevant to each

code, including interactions, statements, song lyrics, and character illustrations. The coders independently coded two movies in their entirety to ensure consistency in the indexing process. Few discrepancies were apparent, but those that emerged were discussed in order to reach agreement on the process of future indexing. The remaining 24 movies were divided between the two coders, each indexing 12 movies.

In the second phase, we analyzed the indexed material inductively to develop themes for each code. This allowed us to derive meaning from the indexed material (Seidel & Kelle, 1995). Two coders completed both phases of the data analysis. After all of the movies were indexed, inductive analysis was used to identify common themes within each category. The two coders independently developed themes for each code. The coders discussed these themes with one another and a third member of the research team to develop overall themes. The third member of the research team had viewed all of the movies and served as a peer reviewer. While no formal inter-rater reliability was performed, this process allowed us to have confidence that the findings were consistent across members of the research team.

Several strategies have been established to enhance validity and trustworthiness of qualitative research findings (Creswell, 1998). To ensure the

TABLE 1. Disney Movies Coded with Release Dates

| Disney Movies | Date Released |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------|
| <i>Snow White & the 7 Dwarves</i> | 1937 |
| <i>Pinocchio</i> | 1940 |
| <i>Dumbo</i> | 1941 |
| <i>Bambi</i> | 1942 |
| <i>Cinderella</i> | 1950 |
| <i>Alice in Wonderland</i> | 1951 |
| <i>Peter Pan</i> | 1953 |
| <i>Lady & the Tramp</i> | 1955 |
| <i>Sleeping Beauty</i> | 1959 |
| <i>101 Dalmatians</i> | 1961 |
| <i>The Sword in the Stone</i> | 1963 |
| <i>The Jungle Book</i> | 1967 |
| <i>The Aristocats</i> | 1970 |
| <i>Robin Hood</i> | 1973 |
| <i>The Fox and the Hound</i> | 1981 |
| <i>The Little Mermaid</i> | 1989 |
| <i>The Rescuers Down Under</i> | 1990 |
| <i>Beauty and the Beast</i> | 1991 |
| <i>Aladdin</i> | 1992 |
| <i>The Lion King</i> | 1994 |
| <i>Pocahontas</i> | 1995 |
| <i>The Hunchback of Notre Dame</i> | 1996 |
| <i>Hercules</i> | 1997 |
| <i>Mulan</i> | 1998 |
| <i>Tarzan</i> | 1999 |
| <i>Emperor's New Groove</i> | 2000 |

integrity of qualitative research, Creswell (1998) advised investigators to utilize at least two of these strategies. We used four primary strategies: clarifying biases, peer review, creation of an audit trail, and performing counts. Prior to coding the movies, the coders clarified biases, perspectives, and orientations that we likely brought to our research. This process, commonly used by qualitative researchers, allows the researcher and consumer of research to be aware of the potential influence of their belief systems on the interpretation of findings. Both coders were graduate students in the Marriage and Family Therapy Program at Colorado State University. Both adhere to feminist principles in their academic and clinical work. In addition, both also have a strong interest in working with young children and their families, predominantly through the use of play therapy.

Peer review was used throughout the coding process. The coders communicated periodically about the coding process and particular themes, and discussed the emergent findings with a third member of the research team who was familiar with the movies.

An audit trail was developed so that themes can be traced back to discrete units of text. This process allowed for the re-examination of units of coded data to ensure that generated data categories have remained true to the movies. Additionally, after themes were developed, the coders analyzed the data to develop counts on the numbers of movies that depicted the theme.

RESULTS

The results are organized according to three broad categories (i.e., families, parents, and couples), with a section on each of the four specific questions, when relevant. Some of the movies contained little or no information relevant to the category or theme; in such cases, these movies will be mentioned. All percentages have been rounded.

Families

WHO COMPRISES A FAMILY?

Two (7.7%) of the movies contained little information about family structure (*Alice and Hunchback*). “Traditional” family structures—mother, father, and biological children—were presented in 8 (30.8%) of the movies (*Bambi*, *Peter*, *Lady*, *Sleeping*, *Dalmatians*, *Lion*, *Mulan*, and *Emperor*). “Alternative” family structures were illustrated in 16 (61.5%) of the films (*Dwarfs*, *Pinocchio*, *Dumbo*, *Cinderella*, *Stone*, *Jungle*, *Aristocats*, *Robin*, *Fox*, *Mermaid*, *Rescuers*, *Beauty*, *Aladdin*, *Pocahontas*, *Hercules*, and *Tarzan*). Both traditional and alternative families were illustrated in 4 (15.4%) of the movies (*Peter*, *Dalmatians*, *Jungle*, and *Hercules*). *Peter* and *Dalmatians* put relatively more emphasis on nuclear families. In *Jungle* and *Hercules*, alternative family forms were relatively more emphasized.

Of the 23 alternative families represented, 3 (13%) were stepfamilies (*Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, and *Aristocats*), 10 (43.5%) were single parents (*Pinocchio*, *Dumbo*, *Stone*, *Aristocats*, *Fox*, *Mermaid*, *Rescuers*, *Beauty*, *Aladdin*, and *Pocahontas*), 7 (30.4%) were adoptive families (*Pinocchio*, *Dalmatians*, *Stone*, *Jungle*, *Fox*, *Hercules*, and *Tarzan*), and 3 (13%) depicted community as family (*Peter*, *Robin*, and *Tarzan*). None of the movies contained representations of same-gender parents

Extended family members, defined as persons outside of the parents and children, also were depicted. Six (23%) of the films in the total sample included extended family members (*Peter*, *Lady*, *Robin*, *Lion*, *Mulan*, and *Tarzan*). *Lady* and *Lion* included only one biological extended family member (an aunt and an uncle). Several extended family members that were either biological extended family or community as extended family were included in the other four films. *Mulan* illustrated the first of these in that all those in her biological family, both dead and alive, were included in the film. On the other hand, *Peter Pan*, *Robin Hood*, and *Tarzan* depicted community as extended family. In *Tarzan*, the group of gorillas was considered to be one large extended family grouping. Furthermore, when Jane and her father decided to stay with the gorillas, they too became members of this extended family grouping. In *Peter Pan*, all of the “lost boys” considered themselves as family/brothers regardless of the fact that none of them were biologically related to one another.

HOW ARE FAMILIES CREATED?

Nine (34.6%) of the movies contained little information relevant to this theme (*Pinocchio*, *Dumbo*, *Alice*, *Peter*, *Stone*, *Jungle*, *Aristocats*, *Hercules*, and *Emperor*). In the remaining 17 movies, a predominant theme was that marriage and/or children were the expected course for couples—a theme illustrated in 14 (82.3%) of the movies (*Dwarfs*, *Bambi*, *Cinderella*, *Lady*, *Sleeping*, *Dalmatians*, *Robin*, *Fox*, *Mermaid*, *Beauty*, *Aladdin*, *Lion*, *Pocahontas*, and *Mulan*). Only two (11.8%) of 17 of the movies did not represent this expectation (*Hunchback* and *Tarzan*).

Marriage/children as the expected course for couples was most often illustrated by the characters getting married shortly after meeting or falling in love (often in the very next scene), and at times having children soon afterward. In *101 Dalmatians*, Pongo and Purdy (dogs), as well as Roger and Anita (humans), met in the park and the next scene portrayed their weddings. After the wedding, Pongo and Purdy immediately began having children. Similarly, during the last half of *The Lion King*, Simba and Nala fall in love, are assumed married, and by the end of the movie have a baby.

HOW ARE FAMILIES MAINTAINED? WHAT IS THE NATURE OF FAMILIES?

A predominant theme in 15 (57.7%) of the movies was that family relationships are a very high priority (*Pinocchio*, *Dumbo*, *Bambi*, *Peter*, *Lady*, *Dal-*

matians, Aristocats, Robin, Beauty, Aladdin, Lion, Pocahontas, Mulan, Tarzan, and Emperor). This theme was often illustrated in the connections characters had to their families and the assistance they gave one another. For instance, after Bambi's mother died, his father cared for him even though Bambi had never met him and had friends who would have cared for him. In addition, when all the animals were running from the fire, the parents were sure to gather all of their *own* children with them. In *Aristocats*, Madame left the majority of her fortune to the cats, and she spent most of her time and energy caring for them because she thought of them as her family. In *Beauty and the Beast*, Belle told the Beast to take her as prisoner in place of her father, illustrating that she believed her family came before herself. Furthermore, Gaston believed he could coerce Belle into marrying him by preventing the institutionalization of Belle's father because he knew she did not want her father institutionalized.

There do not appear to be any patterns across time for representations of families.

Parents

WHICH PARENTS ARE PRESENT?

Two (7.7%) of the movies did not show either parent of the main character(s) (*Alice* and *Hunchback*). Eleven (42%) of the movies included representations of both parents (*Bambi, Peter, Lady, Sleeping, Dalmatians, Jungle, Lion, Hercules, Mulan, Tarzan, and Emperor*). In 36.4% of the movies representing both mothers and fathers, fathers were illustrated as marginalized from, while mothers were central, to the family unit (*Bambi, Peter, Lady, and Tarzan*). When Bambi was born, his mother presented him to all the forest animals while his father stood far off in the distance on the top of a mountain. Bambi's father continued to be shown as a distant figure throughout the movie until Bambi's mother was killed. Then, the father finally came down off the mountain and interacted with Bambi. In *Tarzan*, the father was physically present with the family on a daily basis and was present at the birth of his child; however, he rarely interacted with the children and behaved as a distant disciplinarian.

Representations of only one parent were evident in 10 (38.5%) of the movies (*Pinocchio, Dumbo, Stone, Aristocats, Fox, Mermaid, Rescuers, Beauty, Aladdin, and Pocahontas*). Single parent families appeared early on in the Disney films (*Pinocchio* was the second movie released), and remained a consistent theme across time.

Of the ten movies that presented single parents, 60% illustrated single fathers. Interestingly, the movies that showed single mothers tended to be older films; *Dumbo* and *The Aristocats* were released over 30 years ago, while *The Fox and The Hound* and *The Rescuers Down Under* were released over 10 years ago. Just over half (66.6%) of the movies with single fathers were released within the last 13 years (*Mermaid, Beauty, Aladdin, and*

Pocahontas). Furthermore, during the seven years these movies were released (1989–1995), only one other Disney movie (*Rescuers*) was released that did not illustrate single fathers.

HOW DOES ONE BECOME A PARENT?

In most films, it was given or implied that children were born to parents. However, eight (30.8%) of the films presented images of people taking on parental roles for children to whom they were not biologically related (*Pinocchio*, *Peter*, *Dalmatians*, *Stone*, *Jungle*, *Hunchback*, *Hercules*, and *Tarzan*). Mothers who were not biologically related to their children were represented in 62.5% of these films, and 87.5% illustrated fathers in this way. As soon as Kala rescued and began caring for Tarzan, she considered herself to be his mother. In addition, even after Tarzan found out about his birth parents, he told Kala, “You will always be my mother.” By the end of the movie Kercheck accepted Tarzan as his son, and treated him as such when he asked Tarzan to lead in his place as he was dying. In *101 Dalmatians*, Purdy and Pongo instantly became the parents of 84 stolen puppies because the puppies had no other place to go.

Remarrying was also illustrated as people become parents, as three (11.5%) of the movies included stepparents (*Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, and *Aristocats*). *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Cinderella* presented stepmothers, while a stepfather was presented in *Aristocats*. Both stepmothers were depicted as the villain in the movies and were seen as uncaring toward their stepdaughters. Both were also jealous of their stepdaughters’ beauty. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the queen tried to kill Snow White because of her beauty. In *Cinderella*, the stepmother treated Cinderella as a slave and did not allow her to go to the ball because Cinderella was prettier than her own daughters. In *Aristocats* the stepfather was presented in a more positive, but somewhat unrealistic light. The stepfather continually took care of Duchess and the kittens, however the speed with which O’Malley was welcomed into the family by the kittens as a father suggests that it is an easy task for stepfathers to become part of the existing family.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF MOTHERS?

Eleven (42.3%) of the movies did not depict mothers. Three (20%) of the 15 movies that included mothers presented little information about the nature of mothers (*Sleeping*, *Fox*, and *Hercules*). In the remaining 12 films, two predominant themes emerged about the nature of mothers: mothers as primary caregivers, and mothers as protectors. Seven (58.3%) of the 12 movies presented mothers as primary caregivers (*Peter*, *Lady*, *Jungle*, *Aristocats*, *Rescuers*, *Mulan*, and *Emperor*) and 5 (41.7%) contained images of mothers as both caregivers and protectors (*Dumbo*, *Bambi*, *Dalmatians*, *Lion*, and *Tarzan*).

There were many representations of mothers as primary caregivers who are automatically attached to their children and provide them with unconditional love. This theme appeared consistently across time beginning with *Dumbo* in 1941 through the most recent of the movies, *The Emperor's New Groove* in 2000. In *Peter Pan*, Wendy describes a mother as "someone who loves and cares for you." In *The Jungle Book*, the theme of mothers as primary caregivers is seen when Bagheera states, "I knew there would be no problem with the mother, thanks to the maternal instinct" when talking about Mowgli's wolf parents.

Representations of mothers as protectors tended to be presented in earlier movies (*Dumbo*, *Bambi*, and *Dalmatians*) and emerged again more recently in *The Lion King* and *Tarzan*. In *101 Dalmatians*, not only was Purdy active in the attempt to save her children, she also was aggressive toward the men who kidnapped them. Even though Bambi's father was presented as the protector of the family, his mother was presented as responsible for his protection as well. Similarly in *Tarzan*, Kerchak was presented as the protector of the entire gorilla family; however, it was Kala who initially saved Tarzan from the tiger by physically fighting and getting away from him. Kala also protected Tarzan from Kerchak until Kerchak was more accepting of Tarzan.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF FATHERS?

Nine (34.6%) of the movies did not depict fathers. Two (11.7%) of the 17 movies that depicted fathers included little information about the nature of fathers. In the remaining 15 films, three themes about the nature of fathers emerged: fathers as controlling, aggressive, protective disciplinarians, fathers as nurturing and affectionate, and fathers as self-sacrificing.

Images of fathers as controlling, aggressive, protective disciplinarians that expect their children to earn their love rather than giving it unconditionally were illustrated in 8 (53.3%) of the 15 films (*Bambi*, *Peter*, *Lady*, *Stone*, *Mermaid*, *Lion*, *Hunchback*, and *Tarzan*). In *Tarzan*, Kercheck did not accept Tarzan into the family as his son until he had proved that he was worthy of Kercheck's love. Furthermore, Kercheck was presented as the primary disciplinarian for all the gorilla children. In *Lady and the Tramp*, when Jim and Darling were training Lady, Darling wanted to let Lady sleep with them because Lady was whining. However, Jim insisted that they must be firm with her. This representation of fathers was not isolated to movies released during a particular time period.

Seven (46.6%) of the 15 movies continually presented fathers as nurturing and affectionate parents that listened to their children (*Pinocchio*, *Dalmatians*, *Jungle*, *Beauty*, *Aladdin*, *Mulan*, and *Emperor*). In *Beauty and the Beast*, Belle's father listened to her concerns about not fitting in and was supportive of her not wanting to marry Gaston. Throughout *101 Dalmatians*, Pogo was very nurturing and involved with the puppies.

Fathers were shown as self sacrificing in 8 (53.3%) of the 15 movies (*Pinocchio*, *Dalmatians*, *Jungle*, *Mermaid*, *Beauty*, *Lion*, *Mulan*, and *Tarzan*). These fathers often sacrificed themselves in attempts to save their children. Gepetto was swallowed by a whale while searching for Pinocchio; King Triton agreed to take Ariel's place in Ursula's "garden" in order to save her; Maurice risked his life in the forest in order to save Belle from the Beast; and Kercheck was killed while defending the gorillas from Clayton and his men.

There did appear to be some patterns across time in how mothers and fathers were represented in the movies.

Couples

WHO COMPRISES A COUPLE?

All couples shown in Disney movies were heterosexual. In *Mulan*, while Lee Shang thought Mulan was a man, they were only friends; however, the moment he discovered she was a woman, they fell in love.

HOW ARE COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS CREATED?

Overall, very little information about couples was presented in the films, and three (11.5%) of the movies did not provide any information (*Pinocchio*, *Dumbo*, and *Peter*). In the remaining 23 movies, the notion of love at first sight was a theme in 18 (78.3%) of the movies (*Dwarfs*, *Bambi*, *Cinderella*, *Lady*, *Sleeping*, *Dalmatians*, *Stone*, *Jungle*, *Aristocats*, *Robin*, *Fox*, *Mermaid*, *Beauty*, *Aladdin*, *Lion*, *Pocahontas*, *Hunchback*, and *Hercules*). For the most part, it took a matter of minutes for couples to fall in love. In *Little Mermaid*, Ariel fell in love with Eric at first sight, and he fell in love with her after only hearing her voice. In *Pocahontas*, John Smith and Pocahontas fell in love based on appearances, as they did not speak the same language. Lucky for them their love gave them the ability to overcome this language barrier as Mother Willow told Pocahontas to "listen with your heart and you will understand," and she suddenly understood what John Smith was asking her. In *Aristocats* and *Lion King*, it took a little longer for the couples to fall in love—about a day.

HOW ARE COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS MAINTAINED?

Very little information was given to the viewer about how love and relationships are maintained in most of the movies. In the majority of the movies the couples fell in love, got married, and "lived happily ever after." The idea that love is "easy" and requires no work is most clearly illustrated in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*; Snow White manages to fall in love while sleeping (it does not get much easier than that). Furthermore, when asked if it was hard to fall in love, Snow White replied, "It was easy." Although *Snow White* is an older film, there has not been much change in this message in more recent movies.

Another common message was the notion that when a man and a woman meet, they almost always fall in love. In *The Fox and the Hound*, after Big Mama realized Vixey and Todd were about the same age, she got a big smile on her face and began to tell Vixey about how handsome Todd was. As soon as Vixey and Todd met, they fell in love.

In contrast, 3 (13%) of the 23 movies had stronger messages about how falling in love takes time (*Rescuers*, *Mulan*, and *Tarzan*). In *Mulan* and *Tarzan* the main characters did not fall in love with each other until after they had gotten to know one another, which took the entire movie. Unlike *Pocahontas*, Tarzan and Jane had to work for several days to overcome their language barrier and get to know one another rather than having this happen instantly. In *The Rescuers Down Under*, this idea was more subtle than in *Mulan* and *Tarzan*; although the movie did not show the time that it took for Bianca and Bernard to fall in love, it was suggested that they had known each other for a very long time before Bernard proposed to Bianca. The idea that falling in love takes time appears to be a more recent development in animated movies; it was first introduced in 1990 with *The Rescuers Down Under* and developed into a stronger message in 1999 in *Tarzan*.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS?

When a film provided more information about how to make relationships work, it was often related to division of power or roles in relationships. Eight (34.8%) of the 23 movies illustrated couples with unequal power divisions in their relationships (*Bambi*, *Cinderella*, *Alice*, *Lady*, *Beauty*, *Aladdin*, *Lion*, and *Mulan*). Only *Alice in Wonderland* presented the female partner as having more power, as the Queen of Hearts had far more power than the King, and the King was portrayed as being very weak. In *Lady and the Tramp*, there appeared to be an unequal division of household labor, for example Darling prepared breakfast as Jim read the newspaper. In *Mulan*, a song lyric stated, "Men want girls with good taste, calm, obedient, who work fast paced." Even though Mulan did not adhere to this expectation, the only other option presented was for her to fill a "male" role (soldier); thus, suggesting that there are no "female" alternatives in relationships.

Three of the 23 movies (13%), *101 Dalmatians*, *The Rescuers Down Under*, and *Tarzan* presented images in which the couples shared power in their relationships. The time span between release dates for these movies suggests that this has not been a strong theme in Disney animated films. The first of the three (*Dalmatians*) was not released until 1961. Then, there is an almost 30-year span between *101 Dalmatians* and *The Rescuers Down Under*, and a nine-year span between *The Rescuers Down Under* and *Tarzan*.

Throughout *101 Dalmatians*, images of shared power between Pongo

and Purdy were evident. They often were presented as a united parental team supporting one another in parental decisions. For example, when Purdy told the children to go to bed, they asked Pongo if they could stay up; he concurred with Purdy. When the puppies were stolen, Pongo did not declare that he would save them, but instead told Purdy, "It's all up to *us*;" they both went to save the puppies. In the beginning of *Tarzan*, Jane was carried through the jungle by Tarzan. By the end of the movie however, she was keeping up with him as they skillfully maneuvered through the jungle side by side. Bianca and Barnard (*Rescuers*) both shared equal status in the Rescue Aid Society and were often shown making decisions together. Furthermore, no clear power differences were illustrated between the two throughout the movie.

In *The Emperor's New Groove*, both equality in a relationships as well as more traditional divisions of power for couples were apparent. Pacha appeared to take an active role in his children's lives as they eagerly ran to him as soon as he arrived home. Furthermore, Pacha's wife, Chicha, also was presented as a highly competent person as she was able to care for the family when Pacha was gone for extended periods of time. The couple also was shown discussing important matters that affected the family such as Pacha's trip to see Kuzco. This equality, however, was not evident throughout the entire relationship. For instance, Pacha chose not to share important information, such as the fact that Kuzco planned to destroy their home with Chicha. Furthermore, Chicha never left the house and was always shown doing domestic duties, such as cleaning the house and caring for the children. In addition, her pregnancy was never directly commented on throughout the movie; in fact she did not have the baby by the end of the movie. This seems to suggest that being pregnant is what wives do, an image consistent with gender stereotypes related to couples.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide information for family therapists when working with children and their families. Considering that millions of people have purchased copies of Disney animated films in the United States, these films are likely to play a role in the development of children's culture and may influence children's and adult's information about families.

The following section will discuss four salient themes in the way in which Disney animated films represent couples and families: (1) family relationships are a strong priority, (2) families are diverse, but diversity is often simplified, (3) fathers are elevated, while mothers are marginalized, and (4) couples are represented based on traditional gender roles. Clinical implications of the findings of this study also will be provided for two types of

clinical situations: assisting parents in becoming mediators of their children's media use, and using Disney movies as a means to integrate children into family therapy.

Family Relationships are a Strong Priority

Disney animated films contain strong messages about the importance of family relationships. The majority of families were presented as providing a caring and nurturing environment for family members. Family members were often shown making great sacrifices for one another, and putting their families' well being before their own. The value that Disney animated films places on family is likely consistent with the values that most parents and family professionals want to instill in children. Therefore, this theme in Disney movies can be reinforced with children by parents and can be used by family therapists in working with families on strengthening family relationships.

Families are Diverse, but Diversity is Often Simplified

Another salient theme in the movies is that families are diverse. The movies portray a variety of family forms, including two-parent, single parent, and stepparent families. Several families created through adoption are depicted, and three films (*Peter*, *Robin*, and *Tarzan*) show a family being created through community. Having a variety of families portrayed in the animated films is beneficial for children in two ways. It presents children with images of families other than their own, helping children to realize that there are many family types they can belong to later in life. It also increases the likelihood that children will be able to see a representation of their own kind of family in at least some of the movies. Unfortunately, families with gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender members are not represented in the Disney animated film. Consequently, children in these families are not able to benefit from the variety of family forms presented in the same way other children can, in that they are not able to see a reflection of their family in any of the animated films.

While diverse family forms are presented, it is unfortunate that some of the family forms were presented in an unrealistic or negative way. For example, in films depicting stepfamilies, all of the stepmothers are portrayed as evil and the stepfather is portrayed as good and caring. Also, in families where the biological parents are not in a relationship together, Disney films tend to simplify the relationships, which in the real world can be quite complex. For example, a film will only present one parent while very little explanation is provided for the absence of the other. These depictions do not provide good examples of both parents staying involved in their children's lives in healthy productive ways after the divorce or break up of parents.

Stepfamilies are often simplified in a similar manner; often only one or two parents are shown, when in reality these families often include four or more parents.

This tendency to simplify complex family structures is problematic because repeated viewing of these films has the potential to influence children's expectations about themselves and their own families. For example, if a child internalizes the Disney representation of divorced families only including one parent, the child's fear of loss of a parent through divorce may be unnecessarily heightened as he/she may worry about never seeing one of his/her parents again after a divorce. Similar dynamics may occur if children internalize the Disney representation of remarriage of parents; for instance, they may assume that stepmothers often dislike and mistreat stepchildren.

Fathers are Elevated, While Mothers are Marginalized

Although not typical in the sample, there are several nurturing fathers depicted in Disney movies. In some ways, this treatment of fathers as involved with and nurturing of children appears to be a positive trend in the Disney animated family. However, close examination of this trend reveals that this development of fathers' role has taken place at the expense of the mothers' role. The majority of the films that present fathers as nurturing either have completely left out mothers with little or no explanation, or the films marginalize mothers from the story (*Pinocchio*, *Jungle*, *Beauty*, *Aladdin*, *Mulan*, and *Emperor*). Furthermore, between 1989 and 1995, only one of six Disney movies released had illustrations of mothers. This depiction of parents suggests that fathers are only required or able to be nurturing when a mother is not available to nurture the child. This is problematic when considering how this theme may influence boys' and girls' beliefs about the potential or expectation for fathers' relationships with and responsibilities to children.

Traditional Gender Representations of Couples

In most Disney movies, couples are depicted in ways that are consistent with traditional gender stereotypes. The majority of couples fall in love at first sight and "live happily ever after." These images encourage an expectation for relationships that is unrealistic, as couples do not tend to live happily ever after without effort from both partners. Images of love at first sight in the films encourage the belief that physical appearance is the most important thing when entering an intimate relationship. These representations of couples also tend to present the image that marriage and children are the ultimate goal in life for all people. Although on the surface this may seem like a harmless and even positive message, this can be problematic for people

who find that they do not want to have children and for people who choose not to or cannot marry for various reasons.

In conjunction with many of the messages about families and parents presented in the animated films, girls appear to receive conflicted messages. On one hand, marriage and children are presented as the ultimate goal of life. On the other hand, women are often depicted in marginalized and powerless roles once married with children. Although these messages are beginning to change in some newer films, there are also current films that continue to perpetuate this unrealistic expectation for relationships.

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

Although the animated films, as a whole, present more images consistent with traditional gender stereotypes related to couples and families, there are many alternatives to these messages presented throughout several of the films. Because children's existing knowledge influences the way children view media (Durkin, 1985; Van Evra, 1998), both couterstereotypic and stereotypic ideas about couples and families have the potential to be reinforced and learned through repetitive viewing of Disney films. Therapists working with parents and families can use the findings of this study to help coach parents in how to reinforce their values about couples and families with their children. The findings of this study can also provide therapists with relevant material when integrating children in family therapy.

Helping Parents Serve as Mediators

Two determining factors in how children make sense of media images are their existing knowledge base (Durkin, 1985; Gunter & McAleer, 1997; Van Evra, 1998) and parental mediation (Atkin, 1981). Therefore, it is important for therapists to coach parents in how to take an active role in their children's viewing of media in general. Encouraging parents to first clarify their own values about particular issues or topics related to couples and families and gender expectations within both can be a helpful starting point for parents. Therapists may ask parents: "What are three of the most important values you want your children to learn about intimate relationships?" "Why are these values the most important?" "In addition to your own relationship, what kinds of relationships do you want your children to learn about?" For example, opposite-sex, two-parent families may want their children to learn about single-parent families and same-sex parent families. "Which of your values and beliefs about couples are not as important for your children learn?" "What are your beliefs about gender expectations in relationships?" "Do you feel that there are certain expectations for women and others for men?" Some parents may already be

clear about their answers to these questions while others may not have clarified these questions for themselves. Once parents have a clear understanding of the values to which they want to expose their children, therapists can coach parents to reinforce media images that are consistent with their beliefs and mediate those that are not.

It often will be important for therapists to teach parents what questions to ask their children. For example, parents might be encouraged to use difference questions like, "How would the story be different if Jasmine's mom was included in the story?" "What would have happened if Cinderella and the Prince had more time at the ball to get to know one another?" Parents also can present alternative explanations for events in the film. For example, when Sleeping Beauty is riding sidesaddle while the Prince is leading the horse at the end of the movie, parents may suggest such alternative explanations as, "Look, she is teaching him how to ride the horse," or "They must be taking turns riding the horse; when do you think his turn will be?" Parents also can encourage children to develop their own alternatives by asking, "Why do you think she is riding the horse and he is walking?"

Using Disney Films to Incorporate Children in Family Therapy

Therapists who have a greater understanding of the messages that inform children's culture through popular stories, fairy tales, and movies can use this understanding to more effectively incorporate young children into family therapy. As Corsaro (1997) and Wolf and Heath (1992) argue, children use this kind of information to make meaning of themselves and their surroundings. Therapists can use the Disney animated films to illustrate common themes the family is struggling with or that represent the goals the family is working toward as a way to help them in therapy. Therapist can request that the family watch a particular movie or several movies together and talk about the ways in which they are similar and different than the families in the movies, as well as what aspects of these families they particularly like or do not like. Therapists also may ask the family to re-author the story together and individually in session. In re-authoring the Disney story, families are likely to metaphorically re-author their own family story and present their desired solutions to the family problem. These interventions can serve multiple functions for the family: (a) to encourage them to interact as a family unit toward their desired goal, (b) to be inclusive of all family members, (c) to teach parents how to play an active role in their children's social learning through media, and (d) to enable the family to be proactive in dealing with their problems and talking about how they want their family to be. Two themes identified in the results section will be used to illustrate ways the Disney animated films can be used to incorporate children into family therapy.

Who Comprises a Family?

For a family with young children that is attending therapy to deal with blended family difficulties, interventions using the Disney films may be particularly helpful. If the family is not familiar with any of the three movies that include stepparents, the family can watch one of them before the next session. The therapist can encourage the parents to ask the children some of the difference and alternative explanation questions listed in the previous section and to re-author the story. The therapist may want to ask individual family members to re-author the story and then ask the whole family to re-author it together. For a family that is struggling with integrating a stepmother into the family, a child may re-author the story in a way that includes her mother and father, and presents the stepmother as nicer to the children. This intervention also may serve as a way for the family members to tell a story about what they think the problem is. For example, a child who views his stepparent as the problem may write them out of the story in their re-authoring.

What Is The Nature of Fathers?

Using the animated movies in family therapy also may be helpful when working with a father who has not been very involved in his child's life and now wants to become more involved. The therapist can have the child list their favorite Disney animated movies and then ask, "What do you like about the dad in that movie?" "In what ways do you wish your dad could be like that dad?" The therapist may then ask the father, "What kind of dad did you want when you were your child's age?" The therapist could then present a re-authoring of the movie where the father and child in the movie did not have contact for a long time and then ask, "How would this father go about interacting with the child and becoming part of the child's life." This intervention is likely to present the family with a picture of what each sees as the solution to their family problems as well as potentially what they see as the problem.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This is a descriptive study; it only reports common themes related to couples and families depicted in Disney movies. The design of this study does not allow us to determine what meanings children derive from these movies or the influence that these meanings have, if any, on their beliefs, values, and behaviors. It would be beneficial to conduct future research that interviewed children individually or in focus groups to determine the meaning they derive from these movies. Additionally, future research that determines the influence of media messages on children's understanding of and behavior in

family relationships would be helpful. Research that examines the effectiveness of incorporating Disney movies into therapy with adults and children would provide a stronger base from which to design interventions.

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