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The Portrayal of Families across Generations in Disney Animated Films

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Abstract: Disney animated films continue to serve as an influential form of media that shapes children's development of beliefs about the world surrounding them, including the construct of the family. However, a census analysis as to how Disney animated films represent depictions of families has yet to be conducted. To fill this gap, we assessed the qualities of family demographics, structure, and function in a census analysis of 85 Disney animated films from the years 1937–2018. Results indicated that single parent families (41.3%) was the most predominantly represented family structure, followed by nuclear (25%) and guardian (19.2%). We also observed that the first depiction of a non-Caucasian family was presented in the 1990s, with a growing number of ethnically diverse families since that time. However, minimal interactions between families of differing ethnicities are noted. Overall, over 75% of all Disney animated films depicted warm and supportive familial interactions, with 78.8% of the films illustrating a positive relationship between the protagonist and his/her family. Analysis and implications are offered for parents and educators who wish to further understand the content Disney animated films offer in depicting families.

Keywords: content analysis; cultivation; Disney; family; family structure; family function

1. Introduction and Literature Review

Media representations of the family to younger audiences have been of interest since the emergence of television (Morgan et al. 1999, p. 47). Singer and Singer (1984) equated the degree of influence of media families to children's real-life interactions with parents and family environment. Indeed, media family portrayals provide children with exemplars that offer information about family construction, home environment, parent-child interactions, and family roles. Thus, children may identify with and experience emotional bonds to certain characters to the extent to which they develop parasocial relationships, draw comparisons between media families and real-life interactions, and imitate behavioral practices (Callister et al. 2007; Robinson and Skill 2001).

Whereas past research has moderately explored family portrayals on prime-time television (Butsch 1992; Callister et al. 2007; Dates and Stroman 2001; Douglas and Olson 1995; Greenberg and Collette 1997; Heintz-Knowles 2001; Mastro and Greenberg 2000; Merritt and Stroman 1993; Moore 1992; Pohan and Mathison 2007; Power et al. 1993; Robinson and Skill 2001; Skill and Robinson 1994), it is important to examine similar depictions in film. Black and Bevan (1992) argued that film's lengthier format and freedom from commercial breaks may elevate movies to a more powerful medium than television. Yet, research that investigates family portrayals in film is somewhat sparse, particularly regarding media content that appeals to children (Holcomb et al. 2015; Callister et al. 2007).

Some scholars propose Disney films as key influencers of children's perceptions due to their ubiquitous presence and repetitive consumption (Giroux and Pollock 2010; Holcomb et al. 2015). For over eighty years, Disney has continued to entertain young audiences with a wide array of content.

From films and video games to lunch boxes, the Disney characters and their stories have been recurring cultural motifs in modern society. Yet, greater exploration is needed in understanding the patterns and themes of such a widely distributed entertainment source. Consequently, the following examination explores portrayals of the family within Disney animated films from 1937 to 2018. We offer an analysis of the general representation, construction, and function of families within Disney animated films over time in retrospect to a discussion of the effects of media on children.

1.1. Media Effects of Family Portrayals on Children

Turner and West (1998) purported that film and other forms of visual media offer possible modeling influences through increased accessibility and repeated audience consumption. In a national study, Leon and Angst (2005) found that 99% of children aged two to eighteen live in a home containing at least one television and noted that children watch close to 4 h of television daily. Moreover, McDonough (2009) asserted that media viewing among children was at an eight-year high, with two to five-year-olds watching visual content about thirty-two hours a week and six to eleven-year-olds watching about twenty-eight hours. More recent research suggests that some of this time has transitioned to other screen formats, such as browsing websites, using social media and/or playing video, computer, or mobile games. In a nationally representative sample of US adolescents (*n* = 2658), Rideout (2016) reported that children ages eight to twelveyear-olds spent close to 2 and half hours (2:26) daily watching TV/DVDs/videos with a total daily screen media time of 4 h, 36 min.

Extensive media use suggests a further exploration for not only the types of content children consume but also the possible effects of repeated consumption. Specific to family portrayals, Callister et al. (2007) outlined three potential media effect factors. First, media family depictions can be perceived as reality—particularly as children may struggle to distinguish between portrayed reality and reality (Douglas 2003; Mazur and Emmers-Sommer 2003). As Callister et al. (2007) explained, children may look to family media portrayals as "a type of touchstone for evaluating their own experiences" (p. 147). Similarly, the research of Dorr et al. (1989) argued that children often associate qualities of television families with real-life families.

Callister, Robinson, and Clark further identified the amount of consumed visual media as an important variable related to media effects. For instance, Buerkel-Rothfuss et al. (1982) observed a significant increase in children's estimates of the number of conflicts real-life families experience among heavy consumers of family situation comedies versus light viewers. Moreover, Morgan et al. (1999) assessed the acceptance of traditional versus nontraditional family values and found that heavy viewers of television more often aligned with nontraditional values portrayed on many prime-time television series in comparison to light viewers.

A third factor explores the comparisons children make between other families and their own family. Bandura (1994) suggested that "during the course of their daily lives, people have direct contact with only a small sector of the physical and social environment. They generally travel the same routes, visit the same places, and see the same group of associates" (p. 66). This sector of people often narrows for preschoolers and pre-adolescents (Buerkel-Rothfuss et al. 1982). As such, children may rely on media portrayals for information regarding typical family function and structure. For example, Douglas (2003) proposed that through media consumption, some children develop ideas that reinforce negative stereotypes concerning minority families, particularly among children who experience limited contact with minority groups. Additionally, some studies observed that children as young as three-years-old convey ageist attitudes towards older adults (Aday et al. 1996a; Aday et al. 1996b; Rich et al. 1983). Such findings are intriguing in comparison to studies that revealed that 44% of older characters in Disney animated films from 2004 to 2016 (Zurcher and Robinson 2017) and 38% of older characters in children's cartoons (Robinson and Anderson 2006) are portrayed as negative.

Related Media Effects Theories: Cultivation Analysis and Social Learning Theory

Two communication theories that provide insight into the possible effects associated with repeated media exposure are cultivation analysis and social learning theory. Cultivation analysis examines media's role in shaping or "cultivating" individual perceptions of social reality (Gerbner et al. 2002). The theory asserts that the greater exposure one experiences to media content, the greater the likelihood that individuals may perceive their reality as similar. Consequently, cultivation analysis centers on aggregated messaging, or the enduring thematic patterns that viewers encounter, rather than on the influence of a single episode or program (Signorielli and Morgan 2001).

Central to cultivation analysis is the distinction between light and heavy viewers of media (Gerbner et al. 2002). Buerkel-Rothfuss et al. (1982) conducted an examination of what children learn from TV families. Greenberg and colleagues found that heavy viewers were more likely to form the belief that real-world families show greater support and concern for one another. A more recent study examined beliefs about fathers, gendered roles, and television viewing habits among first-time expectant parents (Kuo and Ward 2016). Results suggested that an increased attribution of realism to televised content predicted belief in gendered family roles; additionally, heavy television viewers were more likely to downplay the role of the father as it relates to a child's development. Kuo and Ward argued that first-time expectant fathers may be "especially vulnerable to media messages about father roles" (p. 1).

Another theory that evaluates possible effects related to media consumption is social learning theory (SLT, Bandura 1994). SLT differs from cultivation analysis, as it directs attention from the influence of repeated exposure on individual perceptions to observational learning through modeling. SLT posits that learning is not merely derived from real-life encounters, but that individuals further observe, evaluate, are instructed from, and possibly imitate various forms of models surrounding them—including mass media models. As Mayes and Valentine (1979) described, next to parents, mass media forms such as television, movies, and books are children's most influential sources of behavioral modeling.

The media effects literature provides the foreground for studying portrayals of families in media. Given that children's learning is a vicarious experience and that many children encounter visual media regularly, it stands to reason that repeated exposure to portrayed modeled behavior can influence children's perceptions of social norms. Thus, in light of both cultivation analysis and SLT, assessment of the types of messages that children encounter regularly is important for understanding possible related effects.

1.2. Media Portrayals of the Family

1.2.1. General Family Representations

The majority of the family portrayals literature examines depictions on prime-time television; minimal research has applied this focus to film. Additionally, a gap exists within the literature, with most prime-time television studies conducted between the early 1990s to mid-2000s.

Family qualities most often explored of prime-time television include constructs such as family demographics, family structure, and family function. Regarding demographic portrayals, several scholars note a deficiency in the representation of minority families within popular media (Douglas 2003; Moore 1992; Robinson and Skill 2001). Moore (1992), for instance, argued that there was a lack of minority family representation on prime-time television from 1950 to 1990. Robinson and Skill (2001) echoed similar findings to Moore, suggesting that families portrayed from 1990–1995 on prime-time television were 80.5% Caucasian, 13.5% African American, 5.3% racially mixed, less than 1% Asian, and 0% Hispanic. Some scholars assert improvements to ethnic representation percentages in later years. For instance, Romine (cited in Lisotta 2005) reported ethnic representations on prime-time television during the 2005 to 2006 season as the following: 76% Caucasian, 14% African American, 6% Hispanic, and less than 3% Asian/Pacific Islanders.

1.2.2. Family Structure and Function

In addition to family ethnic representations, media portrayals often provide children with exemplars of family composition and interactions (Levy 1991). In assessing these exemplars, Morgan et al. (1999) proposed that family portrayal investigations must consider two distinct characteristics of families: structure and function. Family structure refers to the formation of the family (e.g., total number of individuals, the number of children) and the presentation of divorce, single parents, or stepfamily members. Family function examines family member interactions and the family relationship climate (e.g., love and supporting versus hostile and non-binding environments).

Family structure. Two basic family structures are traditional and nontraditional families. The traditional or nuclear family structure includes two parents with dependent children in the home. Other types of family structures include single parent, extended, guardian, and reconstituted (or blended) families.

Some social critics link the "decay of the conventional family configuration with the rise of television" (Skill et al. 1987, p. 361). Indeed, several scholars noted a decrease in "conventional" family configurations, or families constituted of parents and married couples without children from the 1950s–1990s within prime-time television (Moore 1992; Skill and Robinson 1994). Divorce and remarriage, blended families, cultural intermixing, and gay and lesbian couples have played a part in forming "contemporary families" (Mazur and Emmers-Sommer 2003, p. 159). The definition of the family diverged from the traditional family in the 1990s and into the early twenty-first century as it began to include a greater array of structures (Staricek 2011). Thus, the definition of the traditional family experienced a shift as families began to be defined as entities that "agreed upon societal rules and expectations specifying appropriate and inappropriate ways to behave in a particular society" (Abu-Laban and Abu-Laban 1999, p. 53).

Other explorations highlight an increased number of traditional family depictions in children's media in comparison to other media. For instance, when exploring family portrayals on children's programing during the 2005–2006 season, Callister et al. (2007) observed 85% two parent families, with 8% single parents (82.3% single mothers and 17% single fathers), 4% other relatives, and 3% non-relatives only. Of the depicted nuclear families, 89% included biological parents, whereas 9% were blended families, and 2.3% had adoptive parents. Callister et al. asserted that the representation of nuclear families in children's prime-time television was above the U.S. national average. Similarly, portrayals of children living with a single mother or a single father were lower than national averages, whereas children who lived with extended family or non-relatives were higher than average.

Dissonance between media exemplars and reality may create tension between children's perceptions and expectations. As Mazur and Emmers-Sommer (2003) summarized, "exposure to more nontraditional views of the family might aid in individuals' understanding, acceptance, and comfort with alternative ways of viewing and defining the family" (p. 160). However, Robinson and Skill (2001) argued that divergence from traditional family structures may, in turn, implicate the precedent that nontraditional family structures are normative.

Family function. Bryant and Alison Bryant (2001) compiled an extensive overview of the family portrayals literature in their book, *Television and the American Family*. In their examination of 258 prime-time episodes from the 1990s, Bryant et al. (2001) argued that prime-time television families in the 1990s appeared to be psychologically healthy—emphasizing depictions of cohesion within family units, adaptability, and good communication skills. Bryant and colleagues further noted that positive depictions within family prime-time television portrayals from the 1990s increased over time. Their results revealed that families from 1999 were "were better connected emotionally, more suited to change, and better in communication skills than those of the 1991 and 1996 samples" (p. 267).

The research of Callister et al. (2007) presented a more mixed depiction of family function. Specific to portrayals of primary caregivers in children's prime-time television shows, Callister et al. observed that whereas female caregivers were often portrayed as competent and mature, nearly 40% of male caregivers were depicted as buffoons. Moreover, 25% of male caregivers were depicted as immature.

Callister and colleagues commented that observations of American culture in which children disrespect parents are reinforced, to some degree, on prime-time television.

Related to general family portrayals, Larson (2001) assessed sibling interactions in situation comedies from the 1950s to the 1990s. She asserted that sibling engagements on television presented a predominately positive image, with 63% of communication interactions coded as positive or affiliative. However, Larson observed an absence of sibling identity development and that family portrayals were often devoid of siblings working with one another to negotiate with parents. Again, continued analysis of the role media plays in shaping perceptions of the family is needed for a greater understanding of the possible implications for mass audiences.

1.2.3. Family Portrayals in Disney Animated Films

The role of Disney in the lives of millions around the world is momentous. As a 169-billion-dollar industry, the Disney Corporation serves as a global leader with respect to media creation and product distribution (Forbes 2017). Furthermore, Lin (2001) asserted that once a movie is purchased, children view Disney films repeatedly—even to the same extent that they view children's television series.

Parallel to the wide dissemination of the Disney brand, storylines, and characters, examination of Disney film content depictions is also of large interest. Such investigations include gender portrayals and the modeling of gender (Coyne et al. 2016; Davis 2006; Davis 2015; England et al. 2011; Gillam and Wooden 2008; Hoerrner 1996), feminism (Downey 1996; Sawyer 2011), race and diversity (Cheu 2013; Faherty 2001; Lacroix 2004; Towbin et al. 2004), aggressive behaviors (Coyne and Whitehead 2008), the portrayal of older characters (Robinson et al. 2007; Zurcher and Robinson 2017), and pro-social behaviors (Padilla-Walker et al. 2013).

Assessment of family portrayals within Disney films have, comparatively, been minimally explored. To date, most investigations explore specific qualities related to family portrayals (e.g., the presence and role of single parents, themes related to couples and families in Disney princess films, etc.) in comparison to broader representations of the family and family structures. For instance, Junn (1997) observed that when lead characters suffered the loss of a parent, this absence often featured the loss of a mother rather than the father. Moreover, DiPirro (2007) observed that 63% of Disney princesses had fathers and only 25% had mothers. Others posited that it is through Disney's portrayal of marginalized women and elevated men within the nuclear family that the need for a princess to find love and a marriage for herself surfaced (Hecht 2011). Similarly, Garlen and Sandlin (2017) asserted that audiences may create unrealistic expectations of family, love, and marriage that are "socially harmful to women" through the repetitive consumption of Disney princess films (p. 960). Garlen and Sandlin further declared that a consistent emphasis on true love partners, marriage, and the romantic ideal perpetuates the belief that the highest degree of happiness can only be achieved by finding one's "true love" and marital success. Such precedence within Disney princess films, may, in turn, set individuals up for failure and is labeled by the researchers as a "cruel optimism" (p. 958).

A few investigations explore Disney family-related themes in smaller samples of Disney animated films. To illustrate, Tanner et al. (2003) identified four overarching thematic patterns regarding family portrayals within 26 Disney animated films: patterns included (1) "family relationships are a strong priority"; (2) "families are diverse, but the diversity is often simplified"; (3) "fathers are elevated while mothers are marginalized"; and (4) "couple relationships are created by 'love at first sight', are easily maintained, and are often characterized by gender-based power differentials" (p. 355).

A comprehensive analysis of the portrayal of families in Disney animated films has yet be undertaken. Junn (1997) called attention to a gap in the family portrayals literature, suggesting the need for further research of Disney films. She stated:

> Future research must examine the relation between media depictions and children's perceptions, in addition to further study of the other variables that may influence children's developing concepts of love, marriage, and sexuality (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, culture, media, family structure). [...] while the Disney name and traditions are without a doubt

beloved by many around the world as symbolizing 'wholesome, family entertainment', this study reinforces the fact that the media, including the film industry, also represents a social and cultural institution that ultimately creates, produces, and disseminates ideological constructs in the form of a commercial mass product (Levy 1991). Armed with this economic and political perspective, both researchers and the public might be better equipped to demand accountability and high quality programming from the media industries.

We are not aware of any research that has conducted a broad, comprehensive analysis of the portrayal of families within Disney animated films. As Disney animated films are repeatedly watched and offer possible cultivated and learning implications, this investigation seeks to provide a greater understanding of the portrayals of families within Disney animated films from 1937 to 2018. The following research questions served as a guide in this inquiry:

RQ1: What are the predominant family structures that appear within Disney animated films?

RQ2: How are families represented in terms of ethnicity?

RQ3: What is the composition of families in terms of the number of children and siblings?

RQ4: Are families supportive or unsupportive of one another?

RQ5: Are the relationships between the protagonist and their families positive, negative, or neutral?

RQ6: What is the predominant family relationship climate?

RQ7: Have any of the aforementioned qualities changed over time?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Film Selection Procedures

The present investigation evaluated a census of 85 Disney animated feature films through content analysis. To create this census, we integrated two Disney animated film census lists from previous explorations beginning with *Snow White* in 1937 and ending with *Coco* in 2017.

The first film list was constructed by Robinson et al. (2007) in their assessment of older characters in Disney animated films. This list was comprised of a census of 34 Disney animated films from 1937 to 2004. The research of Robinson and colleagues excluded computer animated films, as their original intent was to only evaluate animated films. As computer animated films have increased in popularity and production, the present analysis added 6 computer animated films that were released during 1937–2004, including *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, *Toy Story*, *A Bug's Life*, *Dinosaur*, *Monsters Inc.*, and *Finding Nemo*.

The second census film list was constructed by Zurcher and Robinson (2017) as a follow-up examination to the research of Robinson et al. (2007). This list included a total of 42 films from 2004 to 2016 and was comprised of both animated and computer animated films. Additionally, two animated Disney films (*Cars 3* and *Coco*) have premiered since the publication of Zurcher and Robinson (2017) and were added.

2.2. Coding Procedures

A modified version of the coding sheet developed by Callister et al. (2007) that assessed family portrayals on children's programing was used; this coding sheet evaluates general family representations and relationships, including family composition, ethnic representation, structure, support, and general familial relationship environment.

Two independent coders received approximately 5 h of training prior to commencing the study. Coding instruction included training in (1) family identification and composition; (2) extended family identification and composition; (3) family ethnic representations; (4) overall family relationship and support; and (5) overall relationship quality between the protagonist and his/her family.

The inclusion of a family was identified through at least one of the following qualities: (1) married or unmarried adults with dependent or adult children; (2) homeowner(s) with dependent children; and/or (3) characters that performed parent-like duties and were depicted as genetically or legally related (Callister et al. 2007; Skill and Robinson 1994). Additionally, we coded for predominant family structures or families that maintained an influential role to the film's central plot. Family structures or members that were featured briefly (usually less than 5 s on-screen) or that did not offer general character information (such as the names of characters) were excluded. Surrogate families, or other organizational structures that featured strong relationships (e.g., workplace members, sports teams), were also excluded (Douglas and Olson 1995)

Cohen's (1960) Kappa was used to establish inter-coder reliability. Coders evaluated 10% of the total number of included animated films separately and discussed variances. All reliabilities achieved 85% or higher. Coding discrepancies were discussed and resolved by both coders.

2.3. Variables of Interest

Operational definitions as identified by the research of Callister et al. (2007) regarding family structure and function were used. Definitions for variables of interest are provided below.

Family configuration. Structural classifications of family configuration mirrored definitions provided by the US Census. *Nuclear families* included families in which both parents (either biological, stepparents, or adoptive) were present with dependent children. *Single-parent families* involved only one parent present with dependent children. *Reconstituted families*, or blended families, were defined as a nuclear family in which families are joined through a new marriage from a previous marriage. *Empty-nest families* were defined as married couples who have adult children who no longer live in the home. *Childless families* included married couples who do not have children. *Extended families* were households that encompassed family members other than parents and their children (such as cousins, uncles, aunts, and grandparents, etc.). Finally, *guardian families* were defined as families led by individuals who are not the legal parents of children but who assumed responsibility for the involved child or children (Skill and Robinson 1994).

Family support. Family support was categorized through the variables of *supportive, unsupportive*, and *mixed support*. *Supportive families* displayed instances in which family members assisted one another through affection, emotional support, and/or positive parent-child interactions. A clear example of this is Simba's father, Mufasa, in *The Lion King*. *Unsupportive families* illustrated negative parent-child relationships in which parents were uninvolved, reckless, cruel, and/or uncaring towards children, such as the relationships between Cinderella, her stepmother, and her stepsisters in *Cinderella*. Families that contained both supportive and unsupportive family members were coded as *mixed support*. For instance, the film *Peter Pan* portrays an unsupportive father with a supportive mother. The relationship between the siblings of John, Michael, and Wendy depict both instances of being supportive and unsupportive. Consequently, this family organization was categorized as mixed support.

Family relationship climate. Family support was related to an assessment of the general family relationship climate. Family relationship climates were coded as either warm, cold, or mixed climate. *Warm relationship* climates included qualities such as family support, love, kindness, and/or positive parent-child interactions. For instance, the Robinson family in *Meet the Robinsons* depicts numerous instances in which the entire family shows love, support, and sincere care towards each family member. Contrastingly, *cold relationship* climates displayed familial interactions that are unsupportive, unkind, and/or illustrate negative parent-child interactions. The relationship between Snow White and her stepmother, The Queen, in the film *Snow White*, for example, depicts a cold family relationship.

In instances that showed interactions of both warm and cold family interactions, the family climate was coded as *mixed climate*. A strong example of this occurs in the film *Tarzan* among the relationships between Tarzan, his gorilla father, Kerchak, and gorilla mother, Kala. Whereas Kala illustrates love,

support, and affection towards Tarzan, Kerchak portrays a predominately unsupportive, detached relationship with Tarzan. Consequently, this family portrayal was coded as mixed climate.

Protagonist to family relations. The relationship between a protagonist and his or her family was also assessed. A protagonist was defined as the film's central character, or the character that drives the main storyline (e.g., Mulan in *Mulan*, Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*). Once a protagonist was identified, the relationship that he or she held with family members was coded as either positive, negative, or mixed relationship. *Positive* protagonist-family relationships involved interactions in which family members treated one another with kindness, love, and respect. Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* and her relationship with her father, for example, illustrated a positive relationship. *Negative* depictions displayed protagonist-family interactions in which members were mean, unkind, hateful, and/or cold. For instance, the relationship between Rapunzel and Mother Gothel in *Tangled* was coded as negative. In films that illustrate a character's transition from negative to positive or vice-versa, coders accounted for the predominant portrayal or the depiction that was illustrated through the majority of the film. Additionally, families that illustrated both positive and negative interactions with the protagonist were coded as mixed relationships.

3. Results

A total of 85 films created a census of Disney animated films from 1937 to 2018. Of the 85 Disney animated film census, 12 films did not depict family representations that met our family identification criteria (see materials and methods section). These films included *Robin Hood*, *The Rescuers*, *Home on the Range*, *Monsters Inc.*, *Cars*, *Wall-E*, *Tinkerbell and the Lost Treasure*, *Cars 2*, *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Planes*, *Planes Fire and Rescue*, and *Cars 3*. Seventy-three films included portrayals of families that met the identified criteria for a total of 104 families. The film, *Elena of Avelor*, contained the highest number of family depictions with three portrayals. Twenty-nine films portrayed two families, and 43 films portrayed only one family depiction.

3.1. General Representations of Families

RQ1 explored predominant family structures that appeared within Disney animated films. Representations of family structure were observed as follows: 43 (41.3%) single parent, 26 (25%) nuclear, 20 (19.2%) guardian, 6 (5.8%) extended, 4 (3.8%) other, 3 (2.9%) childless, and 2 (1.9%) reconstituted. In terms of the caretaker role, 31 (29.8%) of the depicted families included a married couple, followed by 25 (24%) single father, 20 (19.2%) single mother, 9 (8.7%) guardian female, 7 (6.7%) guardian male, 5 (4.8%) other, 4 (3.8%) guardian couples, and 3 (2.9%) married without children.

RQ2 examined how families are represented in terms of ethnicity. Only human characters were coded for ethnicity, which decreased the total number of families (*n* = 104) to 65 human families. Ethnicity was depicted as follows: 45 (69.2%) Caucasian, 5 (7.7%) Hispanic, 4 (6.2%) mixed race, 4 (6.2%) Asian, 2 (3.1%) Islander, 2 (3.1%) African American, 2 (3.1%) Native American, and 1 (1.5%) Arab. The top five films that diverged from a majority representation of Caucasian ethnic portrayal included *Aladdin, Mulan, Brother Bear, Moana*, and *Coco*.

3.2. Family Composition

RQ3 assessed the composition of families based on the total number of children and sibling portrayals. Sixty-nine families (66.3%) were portrayed with one child, with 20 families (19.2%) that depicted two children, 8 families (7.7%) with three children, 2 families (1.9%) with zero children, 3 families (2.9%) with four children, 1 family (1%) with six children, and 1 family (1%) with seven children. Regarding the sex of children, 52.2% of children were portrayed as male and 47.8% of children portrayed were female.

3.3. Family Function

RQ4 through RQ6 evaluated family function and relationship climates. RQ4 inquired if families illustrated supportive, unsupportive, or mixed support. Seventy-nine families (76.0%) were portrayed as supportive, with 14 families (13.5%) as unsupportive and eleven families (10.6%) as mixed support.

RQ5 investigated the relationship between the protagonist and his or her family. Eighty-two (78.8%) of the films portrayed a positive relationship between the protagonist and his/her family. Thirteen families (12.5%) portrayed a negative relationship, and nine (8.7%) of the films were coded as a mixed relationships.

RQ6 examined the overall family relationship climate. The majority of family portrayals, or 80 families (76.9%), were depicted as positive, with fifteen families (14.4%) as negative and 9 families (8.7%) as mixed climates.

3.4. Family Portrayals over Time

The final research question evaluated patterns and changes of the data over time. The data were organized into two decade periods and included the following: 1930–1949, 1950–1969, 1970–1989, 1990–2009, and 2010–2018. Frequency analysis was calculated by period to provide an overarching comparative framework (see Table 1). Noteworthy findings included variation from traditional family structures over time, with clear dominance in the representation of single parent family structures throughout. The representation of families with only one child also predominant in each time period. Moreover, all family structures were represented as Caucasian until the 1990s. Finally, Disney animated film families portrayed an overwhelming degree of family support, warmth, and general positivity, with each of these variables above 70% in each time period. Further evaluation of these data is provided in the discussion section.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Variables by every Two Decades (1937–2017).

Assessed Characteristic	1930/40s	1950/60s	1970/80s	1990/2000s	2010s
Family Type					
Nuclear	1 (25%)	3 (27.3%)	0	9 (18.8%)	13 (38.2%)
Extended	0	0	0	3 (6.3%)	3 (8.8%)
Single Parent	3 (75%)	3 (27.3%)	3 (42.9%)	23 (47.9%)	11 (32.4%)
Childless	0	1 (9.1%)	0	1 (2.1%)	1 (2.9%)
Reconstituted	0	0	0	0	1 (2.9%)
Guardian	0	1 (9.1%)	4 (57.1%)	10 (20.8%)	3 (8.8%)
Other	0	3 (27.3%)	0	2 (4.2%)	2 (5.9%)
Total: 104 (100%)	4 (100%)	11 (100%)	7 (100%)	48 (100%)	34 (100%)
Caretaker(s)					
Married Couple w/Children	1 (25%)	3 (27.3%)	0	11 (22.9%)	16 (47.1%)
Married Couple w/o Children	0	1 (9.1%)	0	1 (2.1%)	1 (2.9%)
Single Father	1 (25%)	2 (18.2%)	2 (28.6%)	15 (31.3%)	5 (14.7%)
Single Mother	2 (50%)	2 (18.2%)	1 (14.3%)	9 (18.8%)	6 (17.6%)
Guardian Couple	0	2 (18.2%)	0	2 (4.2%)	0
Guardian Male	0	0	2 (28.6%)	4 (8.3%)	1 (2.9%)
Guardian Female	0	1 (9.1%)	2 (28.6%)	4 (8.3%)	2 (5.9%)
Other	0	0	0	2 (4.2%)	3 (8.8%)
Total: 104 (100%)	4 (100%)	11 (100%)	7 (100%)	48 (100%)	34 (100%)
Family Ethnicity					
Caucasian	2 (100%)	7 (100%)	2 (100%)	19 (63.3%)	15 (62.5%)
Hispanic	0	0	0	1 (3.3%)	4 (16.7%)
Afr. American	0	0	0	2 (6.7%)	0
Asian	0	0	0	2 (6.7%)	2 (8.3%)
Islander	0	0	0	1 (3.3%)	1 (4.1%)
Amer. Indian	0	0	0	2 (6.7%)	0
Arab	0	0	0	1 (3.3%)	0
Mixed Race	0	0	0	2 (6.7%)	2 (8.3%)
Total: 65 (100%)	2 (100%)	7 (100%)	2 (100%)	30 (100%)	24 (100%)

Table 1. *Cont.*

Assessed Characteristic	1930/40s	1950/60s	1970/80s	1990/2000s	2010s
Number of Children Per Family					
0	0	0	0	1 (2.1%)	1 (2.9%)
1	4 (100%)	6 (54.5%)	4 (57.1%)	35 (72.9%)	20 (58.8%)
2	0	1 (9.1%)	1 (14.3%)	8 (16.7%)	10 (29.4%)
3	0	2 (18.2%)	1 (14.3%)	3 (6.3%)	2 (5.9%)
4	0	2 (18.2%)	0	0	1 (2.9%)
6	0	0	0	1 (2.1%)	0
7	0	0	1 (14.3%)	0	0
Total: 104 (100%)	4 (100%)	11 (100%)	7 (100%)	48 (100%)	34 (100%)
Number of Male Children Per Family					
0	1 (25%)	5 (45.5%)	2 (28.6%)	16 (33.3%)	16 (47.1%)
1	3 (75%)	3 (27.3%)	4 (57.1%)	26 (54.2%)	15 (44.1%)
2	0	1 (9.1%)	1 (14.3%)	4 (8.3%)	2 (5.9%)
3	0	2 (18.2%)	0	2 (4.2%)	1 (2.9%)
Total: 104 (100%)	4 (100%)	11 (100%)	7 (100%)	48 (100%)	34 (100%)
Number of Female Children Per Family					
0	3 (75%)	2 (18.2%)	3 (42.9%)	27 (56.3%)	12 (35.3%)
1	1 (25%)	8 (72.7%)	3 (42.9%)	17 (35.4%)	16 (47.1%)
2	0	0	0	3 (6.3%)	6 (17.6%)
3	0	1 (9.1%)	0	1 (2.1%)	0
6	0	0	1 (14.3%)	0	0
Total: 104 (100%)	4 (100%)	11 (100%)	7 (100%)	48 (100%)	34 (100%)
Number of Boys and Girls Represented Per Family					
Boys (82)	3 (75%)	11 (50%)	6 (40%)	40 (60.6%)	22 (44%)
Girls (75)	1 (25%)	11 (50%)	9 (60%)	26 (39.4%)	28 (56%)
Total: 157 (100%)	4 (100%)	22 (100%)	15 (100%)	66 (100%)	50 (100%)
Family Support					
Supportive	3 (75%)	8 (72.7%)	6 (85.7%)	34 (70.8%)	28 (82.4%)
Mixed Support	0	2 (18.2%)	0	7 (14.6%)	3 (8.8%)
Unsupportive	1 (25%)	1 (9.1%)	1 (14.3%)	7 (14.6%)	3 (8.8%)
Total: 104 (100%)	4 (100%)	11 (100%)	7 (100%)	48 (100%)	34 (100%)
Protagonist's Relationship with Family					
Positive	3 (75%)	9 (81.8%)	6 (85.7%)	37 (77.1%)	28 (82.4%)
Mixed Relationship	0	1 (9.1%)	1 (14.3%)	6 (12.5%)	5 (14.7%)
Negative	1 (25%)	1 (9.1%)	0	5 (10.4%)	1 (2.9%)
Total: 104 (100%)	4 (100%)	11 (100%)	7 (100%)	48 (100%)	34 (100%)
Family Climate					
Warm	3 (75%)	8 (72.7%)	6 (85.7%)	35 (72.9%)	28 (82.4%)
Mixed Climate	0	2 (18.2%)	1 (14.3%)	7 (14.6%)	5 (14.7%)
Cold	1 (25%)	1 (9.1%)	0	6 (12.5%)	1 (2.9%)
Total: 104 (100%)	4 (100%)	11 (100%)	7 (100%)	48 (100%)	34 (100%)

4. Discussion

This investigation sought to provide greater understanding of the predominant messages children receive about the general representation, structure, and function of families within Disney animated films from 1937 to 2018. As younger audiences often watch these films repeatedly, it becomes imperative to understand the messages children encounter from this medium. Specifically, we assessed representations of family structure, ethnicity, family composition, family support, and the familial relationship climate. The final research question provided assessment of how each of these areas is represented over time through the organization of variables by every two decades.

Although our analysis specifically examines representation and not direct effects, we highlight several content patterns and possible implications that may be helpful for future effects research designs. First, regarding family structure, the data revealed single parents as the predominant structure (41.3%), followed by nuclear families (25%) and guardian families (19.2%). These results support previous scholarship contending that Disney often selects fictional storylines that integrate the absence of a parental figure as a driving plot element (Junn 1997). However, nuclear family portrayals within

Disney animated films were less often depicted in comparison to other forms of children's media. For instance, Callister et al. (2007) asserted that "the traditional, nuclear family clearly dominates the landscape of children's programing" (p. 155).

Family structure representations within Disney animated films were also incongruent with US census data. Data that evaluated family structures of children under the age of 18 suggest that nuclear families are the most predominant family arrangement (69%), followed by single mother households (23%) (Porter 2016). Comparison of US census data to Disney animated film representations are close to polar opposites (Disney nuclear families = 25%/US census nuclear families = 69%; Disney single parent families = 41.3%/US census data with single parent families = 27.5%).

Implications related to incongruent representations of Disney animated families to real-world families are twofold: particularly for children who experience nontraditional family arrangements, diversity within family depictions may promote a broader perspective regarding the constitution of family and, accordingly, assist in promoting social norms that do not marginalize and/or present nontraditional structures as inferior. However, as Skill and Robinson (1994) asserted, an over-representation of nontraditional family structures may perpetuate ideals of "antifamily"—or the notion that unconventional family structures are normative and conventional structures are possibly unattainable. Interestingly, recent US census data documented a 19% decrease in nuclear families between the years of 1960–2016 (Porter). Future research should explore these two phenomena in greater detail. Specifically, understanding the viewing habits of various audiences (e.g., light versus heavy viewers of Disney animated films) relative to beliefs about family structures may provide greater insight into the influence of prevalent children's media on social norms and behavior.

Another observation relates to an over-representation of single parents. Our results indicated that close to half (41.3%) of Disney animated films depicted a single parent family. Don Hahn, an executive producer for some of the most well-known Disney animated films (including *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King*), provided commentary for this storyline selection:

> I never talk about this, but I will. One reason is practical because the movies are 80 or 90 min long, and Disney films are about growing up. They're about that day in your life when you have to accept responsibility. Simba ran away from home but had to come back. In shorthand, it's much quicker to have characters grow up when you bump off their parents. Bambi's mother gets killed, so he has to grow up. Belle only has a father, but he gets lost, so she has to step into that position. It's a story shorthand. (Radloff 2014)

Hahn refers to the use of single parent family structures as a "story shorthand." Yet, an over-representation of single parents within children's media holds several implications. For one, Signorielli and Morgan (2001) argued that "single parents, contrary to what we see on television, do not live comfortably; most are young, single mothers, often women of color, who do not have the luxury of high paying jobs or a comfortable lifestyle complete with live-in help" (p. 347). Signorielli and Morgan further asserted that positive depictions of single parents can influence societal perceptions, and, in turn, perpetuate policies that provide insufficient resources offered to single-parent families. Other scholars argue that positive representations may offer hope to negative single-parent stereotypes (Pistole and Marson 2005). To illustrate, if a child consumes messaging that depicts film characters from single-parent homes overcoming difficulties and achieving their goals, such messaging may be productive in building children's resiliency.

Depicting young protagonists who evolve and mature within a film may also provide a rationale for our findings of a predominance of single child families. Although Disney pulls many of their storylines from traditional fairytales, the choice to portray single child families further supports a "coming of age" character journey. "Coming of age" protagonist portrayals are useful in exposing children to exemplars of resiliency, courage, and pro-social behaviors with unfamiliar others. Examples of these qualities can be seen in films such as *Mulan*, *Tangled*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *The Lion King*. Nonetheless, such depictions often remove characters from one of their most valuable support systems—the family. As Davis (2006) observed,

> When the mother is alive and present, she is as good a mother as she possibly can be. However, she is powerless, for whatever reason, to really help her child, thus forcing the child to save him- or herself. Most often, however, she is not only dead, she is never even mentioned. Fathers are a little luckier in Disney. They are rarely killed [. . .] Granted, where there are fathers, they are often just as incapable of protecting their offspring as are the mothers [. . .]. (pp. 103–104)

The removal of key family members may lessen the perception that families are relevant to children and their abilities to overcome obstacles. In particular, when parents are removed from storylines, parent-child interactions that illustrate parental protection, support, and safety become nonexistent. Future research should more deeply explore implications to storylines in which traditional family structures are removed or absent.

Related to only-child families are the lack of sibling portrayals. In many instances, Disney animated films do not use siblings as primary characters but rather as introductions to the protagonist. For instance, in the film *Zootopia*, the rabbit protagonist Judy Hopps is shown with hundreds of siblings, even though these siblings play a minimal role in Judy's adventure of becoming a police officer. Such portrayals de-emphasize the role of siblings and may create friction within a familial setting. Nevertheless, we observed that films that do overtly portray sibling interactions usually involve siblings journeying together. Instances of these types of portrayals include *Peter Pan* and *The Incredibles*. Although these depictions are more of a rarity, such illustrations may inspire positive sibling interactions as siblings work together to achieve a common objective.

A third insight regards ethnic representation. Disney animated films' first depiction of a non-Caucasian family structure was *Aladdin* in 1992, followed by *Pocahontas* in 1995 and *Mulan* in 1998. Since the 1990s, diversity in ethnic family portrayals has comparatively increased. Although awareness of ethnic diversity and inclusion of varying cultures may be on the rise for Disney creations, it is important to address possible psychosocial implications for the Disney animated genre as a whole. First, some Disney animated films—particularly those created prior to 1990—may perpetuate ethnocentrism through depictions of centrally Caucasian family structures. In other genres of children's media, older content may not be considered as relevant or influential as compared to recent content. Yet, as older Disney animated films are often regarded as family classics in which generations of children, parents, and grandchild continue to watch these films, the possible influence of older Disney animated films should not be disregarded.

Ignorance about strong ethnic predominance may also perpetuate cultivated beliefs that view a singular race as superior, which belies the complexity of modern family structures. Awareness of the limited racial representation in some Disney animated films may be helpful for parents, educators, and practitioners seeking to promote greater respect and acceptance of ethnic diversity. Such an awareness can lead to greater discussions about ethnicity among parents and children. As Towbin et al. (2004) stated, "[. . .] Disney movies can serve as an example of society in microcosm: there are embedded messages of racism in many of the movies. Learning to find them and bringing the messages into the open can be educational and empowering for children" (p. 41).

Additionally, although representations of various family ethnicities emerged in the 1990s, we further noted minimal interaction of families with differing ethnic backgrounds. Such observations echo one of the four central themes established by Tanner et al. (2003): "Families are diverse, but the diversity is often simplified" (p. 355). For instance, the film *Moana* (2016) illustrated several Polynesian families; however, these families do not engage with families of other ethnicities. A similar pattern holds true in other films, including *Aladdin*, *Mulan*, *The Emperor's New Groove,* and *Coco*.

One explanation for minimal cross-racial interactions involves the contextually bound nature of the types of stories Disney animated films portray. For example, the film *Mulan* centers on a geographically defined Asian culture and remains consistent with this depiction throughout the film. Interestingly, however, ethnic representations have somewhat shifted in more recent Disney live action films. For instance, the recent releases of the live action films *Cinderella* in 2015 and *Beauty and the*

Beast in 2017 depict a much more racially diverse cast, presenting a stark contrast to the films' earlier animated counterparts. Indeed, some critics suggest that Disney has entered into an "inclusive third golden age" beginning with the film *The Princess and the Frog*—with Disney creatives going to great lengths to "avoid gross stereotyping" (Harris 2016). Such transitions may encourage storylines that illustrate characters of various racial backgrounds, thus promoting greater diversity in animated depictions. Again, educators and parents may use these insights to better discern and discuss with children the messages Disney animated films share about ethnicity and interacting with diverse groups of individuals.

The final insight relates to family function within Disney animated films. Douglas (2003) observed divergent findings in the literature, suggesting that some media portrayals of the family highlight loving, warm, and affectionate depictions, whereas others illustrate families that are uninvolved, cold, and distant. Overall, the present census analysis overwhelming supported the first supposition: Disney animated films provide example after example of family support, warm familial relational climates, and overall general positivity. This finding parallels the theme identified by Tanner et al. (2003) in their analysis of 26 Disney films, in which they commented that "family relationships are a strong priority" (p. 355). Positive depictions of family function are of great interest, particularly as cultivation analysis and social learning theory posit that children may learn from and imitate interactions they view in media. Hence, the value of children's media that illustrate instances of family members working through conflicts and showing love and support for one another is noteworthy.

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