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TV princesses in the eyes of Western and non-Western girls

Learning about being a girl from the exotic Disney princesses

Disney princesses are known and attractive to girls anywhere in the world. This comparative, qualitative study investigates how girls from different Western and non-Western countries perceive Disney's new "exotic", "multicultural" princesses.

In her article "The princess and the magic kingdom: Beyond nostalgia, the function of the Disney princess", published in *Women's Studies in Communication* in 2004, Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario remarked:

"The princess is a fairytale staple, and even in the world's republics, she continues to be re-drawn. She has remained a relevant anachronism over centuries, through revolutions, wars, and globalization. Some have sought to reveal her beauty as stereotype, her good-nature as submissiveness, but still she prevails. One of the most prolific authors of the princess today is the Disney organization which produces her in animation, theme parks, on the stage, and in merchandise. Combined with Disney's popular and global profile, this makes the Disney princess in effect the "princess of all princesses" and, although she was born into the paternal world of Walt Disney, she is, especially in the latter decades, putting her own stamp on the kingdom." (p. 34)

The Disney cartoons with princess characters have not only survived but also thrived through the 20th century and into the 21st century. Critiqued by many scholars, they remain beloved

by many children, and they touch the imaginations of generations after generations of girls. Many changes have occurred in the Disney industry of princess cartoons since the 1930s when it was launched to the present day: Princesses are no longer solely of European descent; and audiences targeted are no longer primarily Caucasian children. Yet, as principal investigators in an international study about girlhood and Disney princesses, we have asked each other, and we have also asked our research subjects from various parts of the world: Have Disney princesses really surpassed monoculturalism? Are these girls really learning multiculturalism from the Disney princesses?

The researchers

These queries are closely related to the 2 principal investigators' identities and academic interests. Charu Uppal is from India, pursued graduate education in the United States, spent many years in Africa as a teacher and in Fiji as a lecturer, and currently resides and works in Sweden. Diana Nastasia was raised in a former communist country in Eastern Europe (Romania), where Disney princesses were banned from the media system, and is pursuing a Ph. D., teaching communication, and is raising 2 daughters in the United States, where Disney princesses are seemingly omnipresent in the popular culture. Supported by a grant from

the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI) in Munich, we have examined whether girls from different racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds view Disney representations of non-Western princesses similarly or differently.

The study

Our study inquires about what girls in Western and non-Western settings learn from exotic Disney princesses, specifically from Jasmine, Pocahontas, and Mulan. Because of our preoccupation for empowering people whose voices are often missing from the mainstream media and the scholarly literature, we have chosen a comparative method to study how girls who are exposed to different cultures and ideologies respond to Disney princesses. Our study includes girls from 4 different countries (Fiji, India, China, and the United States), and from mainstream as well as minorities in some countries (girls of Fijian as well as Indian descent in Fiji; and girls of Native American, Caucasian, Indian, and Chinese descent in the United States). Overall, 120 girls participated in the study. For each of the 4 countries, participants were placed into 3 age groups (8 to 11, 12 to 13, and 14 to 15 years) that represent phases of preadolescent girlhood. We designed an age-appropriate interactive format that included watching, drawing, writing, interview, and focus

group. Groups of 5 children viewed clips from cartoons with the 3 exotic Disney princesses. Each child had a 10- to 15-minute interview with a researcher, answering questions and making comments about Disney cartoons, while the other children were drawing or writing about their perception of a princess. Following the personal interviews, the 5 children participated in an approximately 30-minute focus group facilitated by a researcher, sharing thoughts about these Disney cartoons and the princesses they depict. In the focus group discussion the children also connected these Disney cartoons with more recent Disney television shows such

as *Lilo and Stitch* and *Kim Possible*. As Clifford Christians (2005) writes, “multiple spaces ... exist as ongoing constructions of everyday life. The dialogical self is situated and articulated within these decisive contexts of gender, race, class ... Research narratives reflect a community’s multiple voices ...” (p. 229). The conversations between children and researchers and among children on topics related to the Disney princesses Jasmine, Pocahontas, and Mulan provided opportunities to reflect on such spaces, constructions, articulations, and narratives. The diversity in the participants’ answers reflected their diverse cultural and geographical backgrounds; we also found similarities in their responses, reflecting the similarity of girls of their age group anywhere in the world. The girls’ responses were sometimes stereotypical and other times fresh; most girls laughed and one girl cried; some girls sang or mentioned songs and most

girls drew as well as they could. The conversations were recorded and transcribed, summarized and analyzed. Following the analysis, the researchers started to “see” the codes, in forms of patterns, categories, and themes. The researchers used these codes to further analyze and compare the data. The following paragraphs provide a summary of our findings.



Images of (Disney) princesses: drawings of 8- to 12-year-old girls from India (ill. 1), Fiji (ill. 2) and the USA (ill. 3, Native American girl)

What is a princess?

An important concern in our study was how the term “princess” would be defined by the participants. We wanted to know: What are the characteristics of a princess, according to the preadolescent girls who were part of the research? Girls across the 4 countries referred primarily to cartoon princesses and more specifically to Disney princesses, rather than to princesses they encountered in books or other types of media. One reason might be that the girls sensed the purpose of our study after viewing the Disney clips. But the reason might also be that the girls have more contact with Disney princesses than with traditional fairy tales, either in books or told by their family members, that allow for more diverse imaginings of the concept.

Some characteristics of princesses identified by girls in Fiji, India, China, and the United States crossed

national, racial, and ethnic group profiles. Many girls said that princesses were “beautiful” and “pretty” and stated that princesses had “nice hair”, “nice faces”, and “nice hands”. In addition, most girls said that princesses were good and friendly, and that they spoke softly. Numerous of these girls seem to have a rather standardized and stereotypical image of femininity and of women’s appropriate appearance and behavior.

There were many similarities in definitions and characteristics of princesses provided by girls in Fiji, India, and China. However, the ideas about princesses of the participants in the United States stood out distinctly from those of

the girls in the other 3 countries. It was interesting to note that race and cultural background for girls raised in the U.S. did not seem to have much of an impact on their perception of princesses. Meanings and features attributed to princesses between the Native American, the Caucasian, the Indian, and the Chinese groups in the United States were quite similar. Thus, geography and geopolitics, situatedness in the world, seemed to have played more of a role in the opinion of the girls about princesses than their racial and ethnic profile.

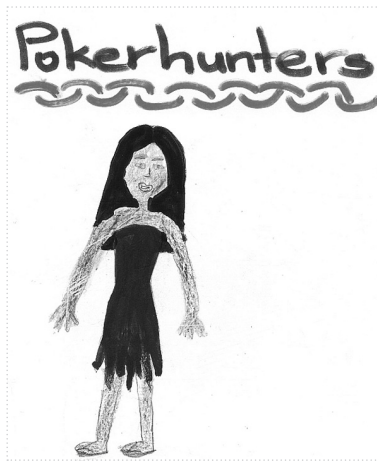
Concern for family and community played an important role in describing a princess for girls in Fiji, India, and China. Yet, for girls in the United States, regardless of race and ethnicity, a princess was primarily someone with material goods. A girl in Fiji said that a princess would take care of her “mom and dad and family”, and that she would also “fight for the city”. A girl in China said that a prin-

cess “keeps her people together” and “fights for the truth”. In contrast, girls in the United States stated: “A princess is someone who lives in a palace, has jewels, and has a lot of money”; “Princesses wear pretty clothes”; “They have special things like dresses, animals”; “They have rich

families, they have money”. Girls in Fiji and India also emphasized the Disney princesses’ right to choose a husband, which may be a reference to their lack of control in choosing their marriage partners in their region of the world. Yet, girls in the United States linked the Disney princesses to independence, and talked about how they appreciated to have independence. The cultural realities of the participants were thus conveyed in association with the Disney cartoons about exotic princesses.

Can I be a princess?

Another important point in the interviews and focus groups that further became a theme of the research was the possibility for these children to identify themselves with Disney princesses, and to feel like they could be princesses. Most of the girls interviewed in all 4 countries declared that they wanted to be princesses or that at least some time during their early childhood they wanted to be one. Yet, most of these girls in all of these countries acknowledged that Disney princesses were fictional characters and did not exist in the communities they lived. So it would seem that the girls’ desire to become princesses was mainly a search for role models and life examples. The young girls are probably negotiating with the fanta-



Drawings of Disney’s “exotic” princesses Jasmine, Pocahontas and Mulan from girls in the US (ill. 4, Chinese-American), Fiji (ill. 5) and China (ill. 6)

sies of their own potential and a reality of their life to incorporate some models of thinking and behavior in their everyday life.

The answers to the question “Can you be a princess?” provided the grounds for the sharpest contrast between the girls in non-Western settings and those in the United States regardless of race and ethnicity. Girls from non-Western countries seem to have a sense of helplessness whereas U.S. children have a sense of entitlement. Fijian, Indian, and Chinese girls see themselves as too dark and not good enough to be princesses in general or Disney princesses in specific, whereas U.S. girls of various descent see themselves as beautiful and good, just like the Disney princesses. Renewed and invigorated Westernization and colonialism seem to be some important results of viewing cartoons with Disney princesses – including cartoons with exotic princesses or with princesses from other cultural spaces than the Western world.

“Disney Princesses are white and I want to be like them”

When asked whether Jasmine, Mulan, and Pocahontas look like her, a Fijian descent girl in Fiji said: “They have a different skin color ... I play too

much in the sun.” And when asked how Jasmine, Mulan, and Pocahontas looked like, an Indian descent girl in Fiji affirmed: “Beautiful, white.” The same girl said: “They were white and I want to be like them.” Numerous Fijian, Indian, and Chinese girls in this research mentioned their darkness of skin and hair in contrast with the fairness of the Disney princesses – in as much of a contrast for Jasmine, Mulan, and Pocahontas as for Snow White, Cinderella, or Ariel. The Western popular culture and mainstream media that reach the Asia-Pacific region have pressured these girls into believing that white is synonymous with beautiful.

By contrast, girls in the United States seem to be color blind and seem to ignore race as an issue: they see Jasmine, Mulan, and Pocahontas as their own, as being like themselves, and they identify with these princesses as much as they identify with those belonging to their part of the world and cultural space. One of the Caucasian girls said: “I am pretty, my family and friends love me, I am a princess for them.” One of the Indian descent girls in the United States said: “In my mind I am sometimes a princess.” A Native American descent girl in the United States declared: “I could be like a princess, though sometimes I could be better than a princess.” One reason could be that regardless of

the race differences in *Mulan*, *Jasmine*, and *Pocahontas*, they all speak American English which facilitates U.S. girls' identification with them. But going beyond linguistic identification, the girls in the United States seem to trust themselves, their social groups, and their environment; all of these would not be bad things, but the question is: Does this self-assurance and reassurance of the Western world people, usually resulting from seeing images that match their reality, hurt the identities and individualities of other people around the world who live in a culture that does not follow the same rules as those enjoyed by their U.S. counterparts and Disney princesses?

Conclusion

Cartoons depicting exotic lands and focusing on the princesses of those lands – such as *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Mulan* (1998) – have become Disney classics. These cartoons are broadcast several times every year in the United States and around the world through Disney Channel and its global affiliates, as well as through numerous other networks that purchase distribution rights. There is even a new cartoon with a black princess, *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). Although certain scholars have critiqued such cartoons for appropriating and stereotyping non-Western locations and characters, such practices of representation have had and continue to have a wide array of consequences.

An important finding, although not an entirely surprising one, is that girls in all 4 countries considered princesses to be “beautiful,” and this beauty is, for girls in Fiji, India, and China, often connected to being fair-haired and light-skinned. Our study also indicates that girls from around the world acknowledge that princesses are not “real”. Yet girls raised in the prosperous United States connect their self-image to that of the princess,

whereas girls in the not-so-prosperous countries of Fiji, India, and China do not make that connection. Girls in the U.S., regardless of racial and ethnic background, stated confidently that they are princesses in their own right, be it because of family love or because of access to material prosperity that would match royalty, as shown in many Disney cartoons. By contrast, girls in Fiji, India, and China did not feel the same sense of entitlement. Girls across these 3 non-Western countries involved in the research did not have a sense that they could ever be princesses or that there could be any relationship between themselves and a princess.

We are likely to conclude that the Disney production of cartoons featuring “exotic” princesses such as *Jasmine*, *Mulan*, or *Pocahontas* does not seem to have given more sense of identification with a princess or of entitlement to princess-like settings to girls in Fiji, India, or China; at the same time, this production of exotic Disney cartoons does not seem to have reduced the sense of identification and entitlement of girls in the U.S. The “exotic” princesses have been appropriated by girls in the U.S. rather than girls in other parts of the world. Both U.S. and non-Western girls seem to view the exotic princesses similarly to how they have viewed *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, or *Belle*: as raceless characters, with a Western world type of beauty and set of ideals. Still, the questions remain: Has the diversification of Disney princesses in terms of country of origin, race, or culture brought a diversification of Disney cartoons in terms of values? Are these exotic princesses diverse and multi-cultural enough to allow girls from around the world to identify with and learn from? ■

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