

Disney movies promote “beautiful as good” stereotype

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BOONE—Rapunzel in “Tangled,” Ariel in “The Little Mermaid,” Belle in “Beauty and the Beast.” Each of these animated characters is portrayed as beautiful and good. The “what-is-beautiful-is-good” stereotype is found throughout cartoons, animated films, full-length movies and television programs and has fascinated researchers for years.

While most research studies have focused on the adult or young adult viewer, Appalachian State University psychology professors Doris Bazzini, Lisa Curtin and Denise Martz have studied the effect viewing an animated movie that portrays “beauty as good” has on children, male and female, ages 6 to 12. Their research, “Do animated Disney characters portray and promote the beauty-goodness stereotype?,” has been published in the Journal of Applied Social Psychology. Assisting Bazzini with the study were former graduate student Serena Joslin and Shilpa Regan, an assistant professor from UNC Pembroke. Both are listed as coauthors of the article.

Disney movies, particularly “Cinderella,” have been cited examples of “beautiful as good” in social psychology textbooks, Bazzini said. “But no one had ever studied whether that was consistent throughout Disney films,” she said.

The researchers found that viewing a film with beautiful and morally virtuous characters (“Cinderella”) did not significantly alter children’s use of the stereotype, nor did viewing a movie that did not consistently depict the link between goodness and beauty among the characters (“Hunchback of Notre Dame”). Regardless of what the children had watched, they rated attractive children more favorably than unattractive children. In fact, children as young as 6 had already developed a bias toward “beauty as good.”

To conduct the study, the researchers selected Disney films that had at least three human-like characters. A rating instrument used in earlier “beauty as good” research identified the films that were highly biased in terms of their portrayal of the beauty-goodness stereotype, or low in that bias.

After viewing the film, children were shown photographs of other children and asked to state which ones they would most like to be friends with. “Regardless of which movie was viewed, children expressed a preference for an attractive child as a friend (78 percent) over an unattractive child (22 percent). Thirty-six percent of the sample of children did not show a preference for either target. In no case did the movie type significantly alter friendship choice,” the journal authors wrote.

“This indicates that the beauty is good bias is already present in children, even in children as young as 6,” Bazzini said. The preference to become friends with an attractive peer did not seem to become more prevalent when the children viewed the high-bias film, she said.

“Contemporary society’s increasing reliance on the use of television and videos to occupy children warrants continued investigation of how exposure to media may affect children,” the authors write in the journal article. “Given that media portrayals like those in the animated movies of Walt Disney often reinforce societal stereotypes related to gender, ethnicity, and culture, parents may consider a more thoughtful approach to the use of television and videos.”

Bazzini added, “Parents should be aware that their children are probably absorbing a message portrayed consistently that attractiveness and goodness go together.” She said, “Even though our study showed one film does not impact this stereotype dramatically, my personal opinion is that a steady diet of these movies is at least reinforcing a stereotype. We have to ask ourselves if we are fine with that. Maybe parents should be having a conversation with their children about these stereotypes.”