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Speech Equality: A Gendered Analysis of Children's Television Shows

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A Gendered Analysis of Children's Television Shows

Whether parents are willing to acknowledge it or not, children today take in most of their

cultural interpretations from media input. According to a study performed by market researcher,

Childwise, in 2014 American children between the ages of five and ten spent an average of four

and a half hours per day watching television, and that number is quickly rising (Wakefield). With

that much social input coming from television, it is important to consider how these portrayals of

the world could affect children. Studies have shown that young girls demonstrate little, if any,

gendered bias towards the shows they choose to watch, however young boys are more likely to

watch shows with male main characters or ensemble casts (Biddle 29). With that in mind, it is

worth considering the way television in the Western world shapes the minds of young westerners

and discourages or reinforces societal structures. For young children, it is particularly important

that the ideas presented to them are ones that will help them develop positive ideas of self as well

as become positive contributors to society. Parents worry about the explicit images that their

children may view, but few have the time to consider the implicit information that children may

be gathering from presumably harmless sources. Childhood is an exciting time and kids are just

learning who they *are* and who they are *expected to be*. The role television plays in their

understanding of gender, racial, cultural, economic and social identity cannot be denied and it is

therefore important for scholars to examine the types of ideas that are being presented. The

gendered attitudes portrayed both explicitly and implicitly in children's television shows can

have a negative effect on childhood development and a child's perceptions of self and the world around them.

At this point in Western society, it is nearly impossible to shelter children of any age from media exposure, and it may even be hazardous to their overall development to do so. A question posed by some childhood development scholars breaks down to how the way television portrays the world affects the way children view it. Despite the fact that many children's shows are animated, can the projections of social, cultural and societal values still have an effect on children's learning and development? Máire Messenger Davies truly narrows in on this debate in her book *Children, Media and Culture* by asking:

> If negative or demeaning or trivialized representations of women, or of ethnic minorities (or indeed of children – although this seems not to have been of major concern to many social scientists studying these issues) are presented, will this encourage equally negative perceptions of these groups in impressionable young viewers? (Davies 85)

Though it was valuable to ensure they were each mentioned briefly, for the scope of this paper, it will not be possible to delve into all of these social groups, and will focus solely on gender – doing so from a language and speech perspective. The paper will also only have the breadth to consider North-American television shows, Western values, and the effects that they have on children living on a primarily Western society. Throughout the reading of this paper however, it is important to keep the other social categories and perspectives in mind, and recognize that while they are mostly lacking in explicit analysis, they remain intricately tied to the portrayals of characters and the world should be considered both as an extra layer to the analysis presented here and of their own rite.

Young and impressionable, where are children getting their understanding of the world? It has long been discounted that social and cultural comprehension is inherent and innate in a newborn baby, so a child must learn at some point in their early development. "Child development theorists have suggested that one of the primary ways that children learn sex-role-related behavior is through observational learning from models and that a primary source for such models is television" (Barner 194). With nearly five hours of daily media input coming from a television screen, it is no surprise that children are learning to base their global understanding on their understand of the fictional worlds to which they are exposed in television programing. Even if screen time is limited altogether from a child's life, this can only last as long as the child remains at home, for once they are in school they will be exposed to ideas and concepts from popular televisions by their peers. Even the most dedicated and involved parents most share social and cultural lessons with those presented in their child's favourite shows. This observation is "consistent with sociocultural, ecological, and social-cognitive perspectives, [that demonstrate that] television is one of the dominant microsystems in children's lives that both informs and maintains their conceptions of gender" (Leaper 1654). As much children's television programing follows a sort of consistent layout, it is rare for the ideas presented in one show to be challenged in another. Even if they are, the contrastive ideas must be repeatedly reinforced for children to grasp onto them in the same why they grasp on to those that are repeated in all the others. It is, after all, not only adults that are affected by mass media, and it is perhaps a daring suggestion – but it is for the above reasons that children's media may just be the most important form a media overall.

It may now be accepted that children absorb the information they interpret from television shows, but the question remains, why does it matter? What are the television shows

depictions of gender actually teaching children, and what effect does that have on their development? "Network executives have cited focus groups that say boys avoid feminine shows whereas girls will watch either feminine or masculine shows" (Biddle 38). If this is the case, the gender-presentation of characters in shows needs to pay grave attention to the audience at hand to avoid perpetuating dangerous stereotypes to emerging minds. Having strong female characters only appear in *feminine* shows is not enough if male children are not expected to watch such programs and therefore will not be exposed to the idea that strong female characters do in fact exist. Furthermore, "correlational studies have found that boys and girls' weapon play was positively correlated with their viewing of superhero shows and their level of stereotypically-female play was positively correlated with their engagement with the Disney Princess franchise" (Biddle 46). *Feminine* and *masculine* shows are known to address different topics, hold a different overall attitude and even use unalike colours and patterns. If *feminine* and *masculine* shows demonstrate dissimilar problem solving skills and dissimilar behaviours it is to be expected that children pick up on the habits they see in the characters they are most able to identify with. "Cultivation theory argues that it is not specific content that inculcates particular attitudes in viewers, but the sheer frequency and regularity with which people are exposed to negative representations" (Davies 85). With this in mind, it does not mean that every piece of media children are exposed to must shatter gendered stereotypes and present revolutionary thought, merely that children ought to be exposed to gender-equal material as, or more, regularly than gender-essentialist material.

From a linguistic perspective, what exactly are television shows saying in regards to gender? First of all, "male characters are over-represented and speak more in children's shows" (Biddle iii). The mere example of male characters being the dominant speakers in children's

shows lends to a belief that men also carry dominant roles within society and that women are to take up lower, more menial tasks. "With a mean of males being represented 8.66 times more often than females" (Biddle 30) it should not come as a shock if young girls are lacking self-confidence. Ashley Biddle performed a study for her dissertation in which 22 popular children's shows were examined for their presentation of masculine and feminine characters. It is worth noting that of the 22 shows marked most popular in Biddle's survey, eleven were coded as having a male main character, four were coded as having a female main character and seven were coded as having an ensemble cast. Across all shows examined in Biddle's study, "males spoke an average of 68.24% of the words… Females spoke an average of 28.13% of the words… Words spoken by both a male and female character (e.g., a song sung by multiple characters) accounted for an average of 3.63% of the words" (Biddle 31). At a young age – or any age but specifically at a young age – it is crucial to hear the voice of those with similar identities in order to help justify the value of one's own voice. Biddle's data also demonstrated that "shows with male main characters and ensemble casts have male characters speaking a higher percentage of the words. shows with female main characters depicted females speaking more words than shows with male main characters or ensemble casts" (Biddle 36). As previously mentioned, it is important to keep in mind the audience of each of these shows and how they can, and *will*, interpret meaning. It should be remembered that "even in the 21st century all communication practices are tied in some ways to the cultural norms put in place by patriarchy" (Ames and Burcon 12). It has already been established that young boys are more likely to watch shows with male main characters, if these shows do not demonstrate adequate female speaking roles, how are young boys expected to learn the value of female speech. Likewise, girls are shown to demonstrate little to no bias in there television show preferences. By making obvious distinctions

between the frequency of female speaking roles in *masculine* versus *feminine* shows, girls implicitly learn the contexts in which their voices are valued and those in which they supposedly are not.

It is not just important how often characters are speaking, but also *what* they are saying during their designated screen time. Returning to Biddle's research, "males asked an average of 66.32% of the questions overall whereas females asked an average of 35.68% of the questions" (Biddle 32). Questions, especially at the foundational age of three to six years old, are associated with a willingness to learn and curiosity about the world. Unlike in adult comedy, in children's television questions are regarded with high esteem and show an increased intelligence. By designating most of the questions to male characters, television shows are indirectly suggesting which characters should be assumed to hold a higher intelligence. Specifically, "an average of 64.96% of the "wh-" questions were asked by males whereas only 34.80% of the "wh-" questions were asked by females" (Biddle 32). Of their part, "wh-" questions are typically associated with the STEM fields – employment and research fields that are heavily male dominated in today's world – this association inherently links this form of question (especially when used with such a wide gender disparity) to a gendered bias. This stereotype is perpetuated through the television shows and it suggests to children still learning basic skills what they *should* and *should not* be good at later in life. When it comes to other forms of questions "males asked 66.71% of the "yes/no" questions whereas females asked 33.00% of the "yes/no" questions" (Biddle 32). There is a lack of evidence suggesting a stereotypical link between yes/no questions and other social behaviour, but the gender gap based on how frequently these questions were asked cannot be overlooked. Young girls need to understand that it is okay and

encouraged for them to question the world around them, just as it is okay and encouraged for young boys to do the same.

Likewise, the way that language is directed at characters of different genders is also worth debating. Once again, Biddle's research provides some relevant data on which to base understanding and discussion in this regard. "Overall, 41.92% of the questions were directed toward male characters whereas 19.72% of the questions were directed toward female characters. The remainder of the questions were directed at the audience" (Biddle 32). As a result, male characters in this context are portrayed as the individuals with the answers, once again leading to an implied suggestion of greater intelligence. "An average of 40.39% of "wh-" questions were directed towards males whereas 18.54% were directed toward females. Similarly, an average of 45.34% of the "yes/no" questions were directed towards males whereas 20.86% were directed towards females" (Biddle 32). The fact that there were more yes/no questions directed at females than there were "wh-" questions is also worth considering. For a character to respond to a yes or no question, they need (in some cases) only hold an opinion, whereas to answer a "wh-" question a character needs to have an increased understanding and knowledge about the situation. Biddle's data shows that female characters were less frequently given the opportunity to demonstrate higher knowledge by answering a "wh-" question than they were to answer a yes/no question. Additionally, the amount of speaking involved in responding to a yes/no question is significantly less than that associated with a "wh-" question. The data also showed that "females had more questions directed towards them in shows with a female main character compared to shows with a male main character or ensemble cast" (Biddle 37). Once again, this dichotomy has the power to suggest to young girls that their opinions and answers are only valued among their female peers and that when there is a male in the crowd, the male's response is more likely to be

accepted or taken seriously. These ideas are toxic for young girls only just developing a sense of self.

To conclude, based on the audience they are dealing with, children's shows appear to quite rarely allow their characters to explicitly discuss concepts of biological-sex or gender. The reason behind this is obviously based on Western cultural beliefs systems, however it is worth considering that discussing these topics with children at a young age could have positive effects on their development and overall understand of sex and gender – leaving less information up to their own interpretation (however this paper obviously does not have the scope to discuss this topic in length). Regardless, that means that as a result, all social and cultural information children are gathering from television shows must be implicit. As such, it is clear that equal gender-representation in children's television is crucial to creating a gender-equal understanding of the world. What is also obvious however is that simply having equal representation is not necessarily enough, if the *way* that the characters are being represented, including how much they are speaking, what they are saying and how they are spoken to, is not equal. If gender stereotypes are perpetuated in children's formative years, gender stereotypes will likewise be perpetuated throughout their lives. As cliché as it may be, the children of today are the world of tomorrow, and to ensure a healthy future, it is important to ensure that the lessons children learn in their most formative years are healthy, constructive and valuable. Are the lessons, particularly the lessons regarding gender, that children are implicitly learning from television today entirely healthy, constructive and valuable? Perhaps not.

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