Binary Ever After: Gender Representation of Non-Human & Non-Animal Characters in Disney/Pixar's *Inside Out*

By Sarah Hethershaw

ABSTRACT. In 2015, Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios released *Inside Out,* a popular children's animated film that depicts emotions as humanoid characters with male and female gender identities. In representing non-human/non-animal beings as adhering to the human gender binary, the film contributes to the naturalization and embedding of the binary in popular rhetoric and cultural values. Binary conceptions of gender are tied to patriarchal heterosexism that reinforces structures of inequality, and the images represented in this film do not go without consequence for the young audiences viewing them.

Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios have arguably become the creators of quintessential American childhood. From the 1995 success of *Toy Story* to the anticipated release of *Finding Dory,* Disney/Pixar films hold an influential and special place in the hearts of many. In the past decade, Disney/Pixar has released ten full-length feature films (*Cars*, 2006; *Ratatouille*, 2007; *WALL-E*, 2008; *Up*, 2009; *Toy Story 3*, 2010; *Cars 2,* 2011; *Brave,* 2012; *Monsters University,* 2013; *Inside Out,* 2015; *The Good Dinosaur,* 2016), each grossing over $100 million in box office sales. Of these ten films, five of them (*Cars, WALL-E, Cars 2, Monsters University, Inside Out*) featured non-human/non-animal beings as the main characters of the

film. *Inside Out* was the highest grossing among these five, earning \$356,461,711 in the U.S. in 25 weeks.[14] The popularity of this film reveals the pervasiveness and influence of Disney/Pixar films in contributing to the construction of not only a national identity, but children's everyday realities (Gillam & Wooden, 2008). Therefore, the implications of how gender is represented in the film cannot be overlooked or taken for granted as inconsequential. Because Disney/Pixar is such a large contributor to the media children have access to, I wish to examine how non-human/non-animal characters in animated films are used in naturalizing and reinforcing gender boundaries that support and recreate binary modes of thought and options for gender representation and performance through analyzing *Inside Out*.

There has been much research done on the representations of gender and sexuality in children's animated films (Gillam & Wooden, 2008; Martin & Kazyak, 2009; Thompson, & Zerbinos, 1995; Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, Tanner, 2004). Previous studies have examined the ways gender and sexuality are constructed and represented through films in which humans or animals are the main characters and object of study. This body of research sheds light on the ways in which media constructsads popular narratives of gender and sexuality, particularly aimed at young audiences. My work extends the existing scholarship by analyzing non-human and non-animal characters who adopt the biological sex binary that humans and animals adhere to by being categorized as

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either male or female (based on physical sex characteristics at birth).

Past research on non-human characters in animated films most commonly refers to animals that are personified and given humanistic traits. However, I intentionally employ both the terms "non-human" and "non-animal" for a narrower specificity. Non-human and non-animal include beings such as motor vehicles, robots, and abstract ideas that are characters in children's movies. I argue that through gendering objects or things that do not have biological sex characteristics, the rigid "two and only two" male/female gender binary is naturalized and institutionalized.

Thompson & Zerbinos (1995) and Towbin et al. (2004) analyze the representation of gender and gender roles in Disney films, noting the differences and inequalities in the ways male and female characters appear in children's movies. Gillam & Wooden (2008) have even analyzed non-human/non-animal characters and the ways in which recent Disney/Pixar films have changed representations of masculinity through these characters. However, much of this previous literature reinforces binary assumptions of male/female and masculinity/femininity. Disney/Pixar's *Inside Out* offers space to consider how deeply embedded the male/female gender binary is in society by observing the ways non-human and non-animal characters are presented as gendered beings. I explore these representations and their potential implications on young audiences.

Children are immersed in media-rich worlds (Martin & Kazyak, 2009, Towbin et al., 2000). The messages presented through images in film are not simply absorbed into children's subconsciouses; children actively construct the reality they live in and engage with through play and interpreting, tweaking, and reproducing familiar images

(Gillam & Wooden, 2008; Martin & Kazyak, 2009). Although this lends room for agency in rejecting images that are presented, certain concepts are repeated to the point of normalization—becoming mundane, expected, and unremarkable (Martin & Kazyak, 2009). Additionally, although there is some "choice" in how audience members interpret these images, cultural and societal values shape, guide, and inform these interpretations (Braun, 2009). Individual choice is never free from cultural constraints and societal norms, and always consists of "choosing" between options perceived as available (Braun, 2009). *Inside Out* reflects the messages appearing in the majority of other media consumed by young children by presenting the "options" available for gender as either male or female. The culturally constructed meanings attributed to gender through this binary has serious implications for individuals who fall outside of these categories. Although I will not explicitly research the interpretations and meanings children create and attach to the images and representations of gender in *Inside Out*, analyzing these images provides evidence of what narratives and discourse are available to children viewing this images.

A Look Inside the Mind

Inside Out follows the story of eleven-year-old Riley Anderson as she and her family move across the country to unfamiliar new circumstances. The plot aligns with events in Riley's life, but the central focus of the film centers around the emotions Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust that reside in and control Riley's thoughts, decisions, and memories in her brain. Each of the emotions are represented as humanoid creatures with varying body shapes, sizes, and colors. Although they have physical human characteristics (e.g., vertical posture, two arms and

two legs, eyes, hair, etc.), each emotion possesses traits that not only mark them as distinctly *not* human, but also as other-worldly, magical forces. All five emotions have a colorful glow around their bodies, which are composed as pixelated in constant motion that make them seem fairy-like. Joy and Fear move with inhumanly quick speed, while Sadness moves and speaks incredibly slowly and Anger's rage literally explodes through flames from his head. Disgust is not presented as having any distinguishable super-"human" abilities. Aggarwa and McGill (2007) describe this as "partial anthropomorphizing" (p. 469). Although viewers can see that the emotions physically resemble humans, it is also clear that the emotions are not human—audiences understand that they are, in fact, emotions, and thus not fully anthropomorphized to be considered humans themselves.

The complex ideas of joy, sadness, anger, fear, and disgust, could have been represented in a variety of forms, and yet Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios chose to design these concepts as humanoid. Aggarwa and McGill (2007) offer three reasons for the tendency to anthropomorphize: (1) to create companionship or relationships with non-human things, (2) to make better sense of the world through connections to what is known or familiar, and (3) as a strategy to construct the world as an inherently human place—a human world that exists within human cultural frameworks and understandings. Showing human emotions as beings with human qualities allows for young audiences to conceptualize abstract ideas, but also limits and constrains understanding by enforcing adherence to rigid social boundaries pertaining to gender.

Joy is the first emotion that inhabits Riley's brain when she is born. Riley's parents call her their "little bundle of joy," and continue to refer to her as their "happy girl" throughout the film. Riley feels heavy pressure from her

parents to remain happy despite all the changes that occur in her life with the move, causing her to become emotionally distraught when she struggles feeling happy. Consequently, Joy and Riley are closely connected. Joy is presented as a cis-gender feminine female character; she has a high-pitched voice and is a thin, bright yellow figure who wears a green floral dress.

Each of the emotion's respective genders are immediately established in the beginning of the film. As Riley grows, Joy narrates the introductions of the additional emotions that become a part of Riley's personality; Anger and Fear are referred to as "he," and we see them dressed in pants, button down shirts, and having little to no hair. Although fear is not considered a traditionally masculine trait (Towbin et al., 2004), Fear's character's purpose is described as being protective and "keeping Riley safe," adhering to traditional masculine values of being a protector. Anger, an emotion traditionally associated with masculinity and men through physical or verbal aggression, is described as caring "very deeply about things being fair," and often problem solves using logic or exploding in a fiery rage (verbally and/or physically).

Sadness and Disgust are both referred to as "she." Sadness wears glasses, has hair that covers her face, and is dressed in a turtleneck sweater and pants. Joy's description of Sadness states that Sadness' purpose for helping Riley is not known, and suggests that she simply does not have purpose or worth at all. Consequently, Sadness is ignored, ridiculed, and excluded by the other emotions throughout the film. Disgust has long hair, exaggerated long eyelashes, wears a dress, and is described as useful for keeping Riley physically and socially untainted, or "poisoned." Disgust not only shields Riley from things she personally finds poisonous (e.g., broccoli), but also by maintaining a pure

image of Riley for other people (e.g., what Riley wears and how she presents herself).

By immediately establishing gender pronouns and expressions for the emotions, the film leaves no ambiguity to how these characters are to be interpreted. Sadness has a low voice and wears pants like the other two male characters and therefore has the greatest chance of being read as a gender ambiguous character—but by immediately establishing that Sadness is a *she,* viewers see that Sadness is an inherently feminine characteristic. Establishing gender pronouns encourages audiences to view the emotions in human terms (Aggarwa & McGill, 2007). Additionally, because Joy is the leader of Riley's emotions, the message reads that girls *should* (and after seeing the film, *want to)* be happy, pleasing, people—to be Joy. Because children tend to imitate same-gender characters more than opposite-gender characters (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995), young boys watching *Inside Out* have Anger and Fear to identify with—the two opposing sides on the "fight or flight" spectrum that suggest primal, instinctive reactions to stress, and that even Fear can be protective, useful, and masculine. This reflects Gillam and Wooden's (2008) findings that Pixar has begun promoting a new model of masculinity that accepts more traditionally "feminine" aspects in male characters (p. 4). However, this new model of masculinity is still constructed in opposition to femininity and reinforces gender hierarchies that value masculine characteristics (Gillam & Wooden, 2008).

Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust are shown in three other characters' brains in addition to Riley. In all other representations apart from Riley's, the emotions are not referred to by name, but can be identified because they follow the same color scheme and share similar physical shape with Riley's emotions. However, Riley is the only character who has both male and female emotions. Riley's

mother's emotions are all women, characterized through female voice actors and evident because each of the mother's emotions physically resemble the mother with long brown hair and glasses. The apparent leader of the mom's emotions is Sadness, who sits at the middle of the control panel in the mother's brain. The mother's Anger emotion has a gravelly, deep voice, displaying a masculine manifestation of a feminine character that aligns with the representation of gender in Riley's emotions. It is not explained why Riley's emotions are both male and female, nor is it clear why they do not physically resemble her in the way her mother's emotions do. Viewers must assume that Riley's emotions will continue to grow and develop with her. Because Sadness becomes an important, accepted, and praised hero at the end of the film by helping Riley cope with missing her life before the move, viewers can assume Riley will become like her mother, replacing Joy for Sadness as she grows up.

Riley's father's emotions also physically resemble the father's character; they wear ties, have moustaches, and are voiced by male actors. Anger sits at the center of the father's control panel, and other emotions refer to him as "Sir." By making Anger the leader of the father's emotions, it further communicates to young boys viewing the film that this is a character they should be identifying with— that Anger is a, (if not *the*), male emotion. The other example of emotions we see in the film are in the brain of a boy approximately Riley's age. All of his emotions are presented as male, and are unable to function (shown chaotically running around with panic alarms blaring) when he interacts with Riley, reflecting the idea that men are not in control of their sexuality (Towbin et al., 2004). Thus, we see gender and sexuality as inextricably linked, with inevitable results of heterosexuality and either male or female gender identity.

In Riley's case, female gender identity is inevitable, expected, and unremarkable. Although she possesses both male and female emotions, Joy and Sadness (presented as female) are the emotions tied most closely to Riley's personality. Additionally, the three representations of emotions we see outside of Riley in *Inside Out* all physically reflect the appearance of the gender of the human whose brain they control. Thus, it is read that humans are the same inside (biologically) *and* out (gender presentation), and that Riley will grow up to be female, like her mother.

Implications

Human emotions are not gendered, yet Disney/Pixar's emotions portrayed in *Inside Out* are. In representing non-human/non-animal characters as gendered beings through using gendered pronouns and maintaining hegemonic ideals of masculinity (as protective, fair, and rational) and femininity (as nurturing, happy, pure, and empathetic), *Inside Out* contributes to the media's hegemonic portrayal of male/female gender identities as the only options available for gender. Future studies should examine how children interpret these messages, to determine how gender is constructed through meanings attached to images in the media. However, the discourse available to children through films such as *Inside Out* suggest to children that binary outcomes of gender are inevitable and natural.

Feminist theory has recognized and highlighted gender identity as something that is fluid and socially constructed rather than a biological fact (Lenning 2009). Even if gender were determined by biological sex, there have been many more than two biological outcomes for sex identified (Lenning, 2009). Additionally, biological sex characteristics (such as genitalia) are not always, or even often, on display for others to see; gender is attributed and

enacted by individuals based on behavioral cues attributed to a label (Lenning, 2009). Maintaining the male/female binary by arguing gender is a function or outcome of biological sex is not only inadequate, but harmful for those who fall outside of "natural" gender categories.

No matter how one identifies, other people will continually gender an individual based off of perceived gender identity (Lenning, 2009). These assumptions operate as part of binary conceptualizations of gender, creating a harmful, exclusionary culture of either/or with significant negative consequences. Gender non-conforming (including intersex, transgender, and transsexual) individuals face social, political, and economic discrimination and violence on personal and systemic levels (Clements-Nolle et al., 2006; Lombardi et al., 2002). Verbal harassment and threats, economic discrimination, invasive surgeries, sexual harassment, physical assault, stalking, suicide, and homicide are the daily fears and realities of gender non-conforming individuals as the result of intolerant binary culture that is reproduced through exclusionary language and limited representations of gender in mainstream media. (Clements-Nolle et al., 2006; Lombardi et al., 2002).

The language debate between the understandings of gender and sex as separate categories displays the struggle in deconstructing binary thinking as a whole (Lenning, 2009). The male/female binary is built upon power relations and hierarchies that cannot be ignored or underestimated. Operating under the constraints of masculinity/femininity reproduces harmful systems of power and actively works to construct gender fluid, transgender, and non-binary individuals as the "other" (Christmas, 2010). Rather than seeing all gender as performative, male and female gender identities are deemed natural, unquestioned identities connected to

biology rather than as influenced and constructed by social structures, expectations, and norms. Maintaining this ideology permits punishment for those who transgress or do not adhere to gender boundaries; the psychological toll of abuse endured by individuals who do not align with the male/female binary is perpetuated by society's refusal to deconstruct power structures built into the gender binary through changing the way we represent, talk, and think about gender (Christmas, 2010; Clements-Nolle, Marx, & Katz, 2006; Lenning, 2009; Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesing, & Malouf, 2002).

Gendered language works with dichotomous gender representations in the media to shape popular values, discourse, and understandings of gender identity and performance in broader cultural settings. Representation is never harmless, nor is it non-political. The consequences of unnecessarily embedding gender in children's media prove to be catastrophic in the formation of young audience's gendered everyday lives. Not only for gender non-conforming individuals who face social stigma, discrimination, and violence, but for everyone. Maintaining the rigid gender binary forces an adherence to (white) patriarchal, heterosexist ideals and values; in order for any group (women, LGBTQ+, people of color) to achieve liberation, gender must be reconstructed and understood to be seen as an orientation or performance on a spectrum much larger than only male or female.

Disney/Pixar's *Inside Out* helps children conceptualize and connect to different parts of their personality and recognize the role of emotions in their everyday lives. Representing the emotions as humanoid characters aids in this process, and is not inherently wrong or harmful. However, by attributing male or female genders to the characters, gender presentation is limited to only two options. Within *Inside Out,* there are multiple secondary

characters who appear in various scenes throughout the film that have ambiguous body shapes and appearances that do not suggest either male or female gender presentation. This implies that the creators of *Inside Out* purposefully chose to gender the main characters, and did so in a way that reproduces hegemonic conceptions of gender. Teaching children to value emotional and psychological health could have taken the opportunity to show that emotions, like gender, should not be attributed to someone's outside appearance; boys do not have to be tough, girls do not have to be smiling, and not everyone has to be a boy or girl to live happily ever after.

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