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Group for Women

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STRONG SNOW WHITE REQUIRES STRONGER MARRIAGEABLE HUNTSMAN: EXPLORING GENDER IN A MEDIA DISCUSSION GROUP FOR WOMEN

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Abstract

In this article, we discuss a media discussion group for female students with disabilities, which we created and facilitated using fairy tales to discuss and critique gender norms. Disability was not the primary focus for our media sessions; however, participants occasionally extended dialogue to include intersections between disability and gender. In this article, we discuss literature related to gender, disability, popular culture, and fairy tales. We detail our case study methodology and explain our findings regarding participants' views of gender representations in fairy tales, the character of Snow White as portrayed in the film Snow White and the Huntsman, and the concept of happily-ever-after endings. Finally, we discuss benefits experienced by the participants in the context of forming a community of learners and building relationships with each other.

Résumé

Cet article se penche sur un groupe de discussion d'étudiantes en situation de handicap, que nous avons créé pour examiner et critiquer les normes de genre et animé à l'aide de contes de fées. Bien que le handicap ne soit pas l'axe principal de nos séances, les propos des personnes participantes s'attardent parfois sur les intersections entre le handicap et le genre. Dans cet article, nous examinons les recherches portant sur le genre, le handicap, la culture populaire et les contes de fées. Nous décrivons la méthodologie de recherche choisie pour cette étude de cas et expliquons nos résultats concernant les perspectives des personnes participantes sur les représentations du genre dans les contes de fées, sur le personnage de Blanche-Neige dans le film Blanche-Neige et le chasseur et sur le concept de dénouements où tout le monde vit heureux jusqu'à la fin

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des temps. Pour conclure, nous nous attardons sur les avantages dont les personnes participantes ont bénéficié dans le contexte de la création d'une communauté de personnes apprenantes et de l'établissement de relations interpersonnelles.

Introduction

Women as a group are typically marginalized in post-secondary institutions due to male-oriented curricula and the privileging of masculine ways of learning (Bechtold, 2008; hooks, 1994, 2003, 2010; Morley, 2006; Wagner, Acker, & Mayuzumi, 2008). For female students with disabilities, these gendered challenges can be additionally complex (Lindstrom, Benz, & Doren, 2004; Roets, Reinaart, Adams, & Hove, 2008). While engagement in critical conversations is beneficial for learning, it is unlikely to unfold within the context of student learning support services, where discussions typically are individualized and focused on academic achievement, accommodations, and personal development (Liasidou, 2014). Therefore, we created and facilitated a media discussion group, for female students with disabilities, that used fairy tales to discuss and critique gender norms. Although we realize there is no absolute "safe" place (i.e., see hooks, 1994), our purpose was to create as safe and accepting a place as possible to discuss gendered representations in popular culture, fairy tales, and participants' lives. Disability was not the primary focus for our media sessions; however, participants occasionally extended dialogue to include intersections between disability and gender. (See Taber, Woloshyn, Munn, & Lane, 2014 for an example of how disability specifically emerged later in the research when discussing superheroes.)

In this article, we discuss literature related to gender, disability, popular culture, and fairy tales. We detail our case study methodology and explain our findings regarding the participants' views of gender representations in fairy tales, the character of Snow White as portrayed in the film *Snow White and the Huntsman*, and the concept of happily-ever-after endings. Finally, we discuss benefits experienced by the participants in the context of forming a community of learners and building relationships with each other.

Creating Critical Spaces: Discussion Groups, Popular Culture, and Fairy Tales

Increasingly, critical disability scholars have called for the creation of places and spaces that seek "to give meaning and voice to the lived experiences of disabled people while also critiquing dominant modes of cultural production" (Rembis, 2010, p. 21). Discussion groups have been promoted as one way to engage younger students in the critical reading of texts (Casey, 2008–2009; Certo, Moxley, Reffitt, & Miller, 2010; Tyler, 2010) and in societal critique (Forrest, 2011; Polleck, 2010; Taber, Woloshyn, & Lane, 2012; Twomey, 2007). However, there is relatively little research on using critical discussion groups within post-secondary settings for these ends. Consistent with critical pedagogy scholars such as Freire (2000) and hooks (1994), we hold that engagement in critical conversations can assist individuals to contextualize, understand, and, at times, begin to challenge their lived experiences within social norms. That is, the ability to reflect on information critically and position it with reference to self, others, and society (Brookfield, 1987, 2012; Freire, 2000; Zipes, 2002b) is essential for critiquing systemic marginalization.

Various forms of popular culture have infiltrated most elements of day-to-day life in Western societies as "powerful regulators of individual behaviours and practices"

(Kearney, 2012, p. 3). Therefore, “it is important to learn how to understand, interpret, and criticize its meanings and messages” (Kellner, 2012, p. 7). There is a growing body of research exploring popular culture and learning, framing media as a “public pedagogy” (Giroux, 2004). Burdick and Sandlin (2013) discussed the various meanings that different scholars attach to the concept of public pedagogy. In general, we use the term to mean the various ways in which humans learn from their everyday lives. This concept draws on Luke’s (1996) statement that “learning and teaching, in my estimation, *are* the very intersubjective core relations of everyday life. They exist beyond the classroom, are always gendered and intercultural” (p. 7, italics in original). In particular, we focus on popular culture due to its embeddedness in Western life.

Many educators increasingly use popular culture in their work (see Tisdell & Thompson, 2007; Wright & Sandlin, 2009a). Popular culture can be used to facilitate transformative learning experiences wherein post-secondary students can be supported in processes that “raise questions and awareness, and...help people think about issues and assumptions in new and creative ways” (Tisdell, 2008, p. 52). Additionally, Wright and Sandlin (2009b) and Jarvis and Burr (2011) examined transformative learning with respect to popular culture, respectively discussing the television shows *The Avengers* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Cathy Gale, the female protagonist of *The Avengers*, was an empowering figure to the women in Wright and Sandlin’s study. By exploring characters and plotlines in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, participants in Jarvis and Burr’s research learned about complexity and morality in relation to the program and to themselves.

Popular culture texts provide ideal sites for critical sociocultural analysis, particularly with regard to gender (Jarvis, 1999). Popular culture has traditionally supported hegemonic, able-bodied, and racialized gender representations, with men often characterized as physically strong and socially assertive central characters while women are often characterized as domestic, nurturing, emotionally frail, and sexually attractive secondary characters (Fiske, 2011; Hodkinson, 2011; Roman, 2009). Additionally, heterosexual relationships dominate popular culture media, marginalizing the variety of gender and sexual representations (Strinati, 2004). Although women’s presence in popular culture media has shifted from outside the home into professional and independent roles, male gazes continue to permeate these representations as women are portrayed as fixated on heterosexual relationships reliant on male attention and acceptance (Hodkinson, 2011). Furthermore, “female embodiment is a disabling condition in sexist culture” (Garland-Thompson, 2002, p. 10), as negative attitudes and representation of women associate femininity with incompetency and improper form. Additionally, “female, disabled, and dark bodies are supposed to be dependent, incomplete, vulnerable, and incompetent bodies” (p. 7).

Fairy tales are one example of a gendered genre that is pervasive in Western culture (Zipes, 1997, 2002b) and communicated in multiple, inter-textually linked ways (Preston, 2004). As such, they are prime material for discussion and critique, as they build on childhood understandings that connect to adulthood. Fairy tales have unique (often ignored) histories that have evolved through various retellings and writings (Zipes, 1994, 2002b). While certain versions of fairy tales can be argued to represent gender in complex ways (Bacchilega, 1997; Haase; 2004; Harries, 2001), those that have persisted over time (perpetuated by Brothers Grimm adaptations and Disney films) generally are those that portray passive, good, beautiful young White women who are rescued from

evil, ugly, old women by active, handsome, heroic men (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003; Zipes, 1997). Happily-ever-after endings typically result in a marriage of a prince and princess and a return to the castle (Baker-Sperry, 2007; Zipes, 2002a). In these versions, binaries of good versus evil persist with masculinized protectors saving the feminized protected (Taber, 2013a). More positively, innovative versions, including films such as *Ever After*, *Shrek*, *Snow White and the Huntsman*, *Frozen*, and *Tangled* and television series such as *Beauty and the Beast* and *Once Upon a Time*, have approached these stereotypes in more complex ways, allowing for some problematizing of gender (Marshall, 2004; Parsons, 2004; Taber, 2013a; Zipes, 2002a).

Methodology

We adopted case study methodology (Merriam, 1998), where participants were bound by their shared experience of participation in a media discussion group sponsored through the student development centre at their college and facilitated by the researchers. The research study was part of a larger eight-month media discussion group focused on using popular culture to critique popular culture representations of gender. Our broader intention was to promote critical thinking skills, support self-empowerment, and build community. Across the eight months, we explored text and visual representations related to fairy tales, superheroes, and the supernatural, with two three- to four-hour sessions devoted to each genre (see Taber et al., 2014, for a discussion of participants' responses to the latter two genres as intersected through gender and ability).

In this paper, we discuss findings associated with the individual interviews and the two media discussion sessions focused on critiquing fairy tales and exploring the character of Snow White. The participants also participated in two semi-structured media discussion sessions about fairy tales intended to encourage critical thinking and reflection (Brookfield, 2005, 2012; Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994, 2003, 2010; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2011). Media discussion group sessions were held in the evenings in the vacant lounge area of the student development centre.

Participants

Four female students ranging in age from 18 to 24 years participated in this study (pseudonyms: Christina, Anastasia, Jenna, and Emma). Three of the participants were enrolled in their first year of a two-year diploma program (broadcasting, educational assistant special needs support, general arts) at a local community college in Southern Ontario, Canada, with the fourth participant enrolled in her second year (early childhood education). Participants were recruited through advertisements and the recruiting efforts of staff in the student development centre. The participants were White and from working- to middle-class families. One participant identified as bisexual during our sessions; the others made no reference to their sexual identities. The participants had learning disabilities and/or mild intellectual disabilities, neural hearing loss, and anxiety-related difficulties.

Media Discussion Sessions, Data Collection, and Data Analysis

The first media discussion session was approximately three hours and involved activating and exploring participants' general prior knowledge and beliefs about fairy tales (e.g., What are fairy tales? What characteristics and story lines are associated with fairy tales?). We then

followed up with probing questions (e.g., How do these characters typically behave? What are their roles? What do these characters normally look like? What do these roles tell us about women/men?¹), and specific knowledge of Snow White (What are your childhood images of Snow White? What are your thoughts on her now?). To connect their perceptions about fairy tales and women as represented in the media, participants were provided with copies of popular “women’s” magazines (e.g., *InStyle*, *Elle*, *Good Housekeeping*, *In Touch Weekly*²) and asked to select and cast individuals as fairy tale characters. Participants then discussed the character of Snow White. They viewed researcher-selected images of Snow White (chronologically ranging from 1812 to 2013), discussing how they were either consistent or inconsistent with their prior beliefs (How is Snow White presented in this image? What does she look like and how does she behave? How do these images relate to contemporary images?).

The second session was approximately four hours and involved viewing and discussing the film *Snow White and the Huntsman* (Sanders, 2012). We selected this contemporary adult version of the fairy tale on the basis of the filmmaker’s attempt to “reinvent the legendary story in a film of astonishing beauty and imagination” (Ebert, 2012). Discussions were focused on deconstructing and comparing participants’ prior conceptions with the contemporary Snow White’s representation, behaviours, and interactions with the Prince and Huntsman as enacted in her escape from captivity, her fight with a troll, the true-love kiss, her call-to-action speech, and her coronation. Participants also shared their overall responses to the film.

Data consisted of participants’ works (i.e., collages, Venn diagrams, comparison charts) and transcribed audio recordings of all interviews and media discussion sessions. Data were analyzed using Merriam’s (1998) case study application of Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) constant comparative method, with researchers individually coding data for themes and then meeting for collaborative analysis and negotiation of final themes.

Findings

Discussing Popular Culture

The participants expressed varied responses about gender representations in popular culture, but seemed to acknowledge that gender representations are often in accordance “with the cultural stereotypes which serve to reproduce traditional sex roles” (Strinati, 2004, p. 165). Christina acknowledged that women were often sexualized in films in general—“Does she have any clothes on... She’s so sexy”—while Emma expressed outrage over specific television shows such as *Toddlers and Tiaras*, in which preschool girls participated in adult-like beauty pageants.

While Anastasia commented about the strength and convictions of many female characters in texts, she qualified that these attributes were dependent on engagement in

- 1 We used the terms “women” and “men” to reflect the binary way that gender is commonly represented in fairy tales and popular culture. This research was conducted before shows such as *Orange Is the New Black* and *Transparent* featured trans characters and before Caitlyn Jenner was featured in *Vanity Fair*.
- 2 These magazines were selected due to their prominence on the shelves of grocery stores and drug stores in our geographical area.

heteronormative relationships. "Most of the books that I read...the girls...they're not as strong...at first. But then once they get going and usually once they meet the boy, they...bring their power up and they're very strong characters and fight for what they want and portrayed as a real strong woman."

Similarly, Emma explained that although in some books women work in professions, they are still "trying to find Mr. [a husband]." On television shows such as *Vampire Diaries*, "young women care about being popular in high school...They care about being rich, they care about having the hottest boyfriend...and are also portrayed, by men particularly, as being sexy." Only Jenna provided an alternative perspective, suggesting that while men and women may be treated differently in some genres like romance, they were portrayed as equals in the media and text that she selected for personal viewing; "I find that they are treated equally with what I read and what I watch."

Strinati (2004) argued that women are "usually shown as being subordinate, passive, submissive, and marginal, performing a limited number of secondary and uninteresting tasks confined to their sexuality, their emotions and their domesticity" (p. 166). For the most part, Christina, Emma, and Anastasia's discussion of gender was consistent with the depictions of women in mass media and popular culture as discussed by Strinati (2004). In this way, while participants had an emerging understanding of gender differences in popular media upon entering this study, they seemingly had not engaged in questioning these gender representations deeply.

Discussing Traditional Fairy Tales

When discussing fairy tales in general, Emma found them to be "stereotypical," and Christina commented, "I'm not a big fan of the stereotypical, like, the new modern-day fairy tales." Emma and Christina emphasized that modern fairy tales are very different than what they identified as the "original" ones. Christina described the original fairy tales as "very dark"; Emma concurred, saying "they're very insane," with no happy endings. Additionally, Christina stated that the Disney films are "sugar coat[ed]," mirroring Zipes's (2002a) description of the ways in which Snow White was "saccharinized" (p. 128) by Disney. However, in her initial interview, Anastasia expressed a love of Disney, especially the character Tinkerbell, who Anastasia said "keeps the child in me happy, and just never completely allows me to grow up."

The participants described barriers that defined and constrained women in fairy tales, as "most of the time in fairy tales, it's the girl that always has to, like what we were talking about before, like doing the cleaning or feeding the kids or doing all the dirty work" (Christina). They agreed that a key feature of many fairy tales was that the female heroine, often a princess, needed to be saved by a male protagonist, often a prince, upholding notions of female incompetence (Fiske, 2011; Hodkinson, 2011):

Oh, prince, save me, save me. (Christina)

Disney ones just actually go, "Oh, pretty, you can't get dirty. You have to wait for the prince to come save you," that kind of thing. (Emma)

By connecting the need to be saved with the need to stay clean, the participants identified the ways in which, as Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003) discussed, women are expected to be pretty and passive. When provided with a series of historical images of Snow White,

the participants' responses to the traditional images were negative and critical. They deemed Snow White as "weak" (Emma), "shy" (Anastasia), and "lazy" (Christina):

She took the dwarves in, but I didn't really think that she did anything tomboyish or strong...She was mostly cleaning up...she was a pretty weak character. (Emma)

All I think about when I hear the name Snow White is her laying on that bed...kind of cowardly waiting for a prince to come...save you...sweep you off your feet. (Christina)

In their discussions, the participants critiqued the ways in which Snow White has been represented traditionally. In addition, they recognized that, as Haase (2004) argued, "fairy tales [that] relied on Grimm and Disney...did evince a paucity of active heroines" (p. 26). Furthermore, "Disney-like utopias" (Zipes, 2002a, p. 118) affect fairy tale characters and plots. While rather astute in their critique of traditional representations, the participants had difficulty conceptualizing beyond normative fairy tale possibilities. For example, when asked to cast various celebrities as possible characters, they seemingly distinguished potential "good" and "evil" characters on the basis of race and age, casting young, White celebrities in the former and older individuals or people of colour in the latter. One participant suggested that Eva Longoria would be a good actress for the role of "an evil stepmother or stepsister" (Emma). Another participant supported the suggestion as a good choice because "the only thing that would really make her stand out is the fact that she's not actually—she's a Hispanic" (Christina).

Both Emma and Christina agreed that Salma Hayek would be a good "evil stepmother" (Emma). Furthermore, Christina stated that Jennifer Aniston was "past her prime," with Jenna adding the suggestion to "cast her as an evil stepmother, she would be good."

They also identified two young actresses appropriate to play villains. Anastasia suggested that Demi Lovato's dark hair would make her a good villain. Christina agreed, perceiving Demi Lovato to be an especially confident individual in light of her recent challenges with mental health. They justified this choice, stating that she could "play someone evil just by the way she carries herself now" (Christina). Extending this conversation, Anastasia contributed that "Selena Gomez could be our villain." Although these characters were chosen for being perceived as confident, they both are also Latino actresses with darker hair and darker skin tones.

In contrast, participants chose Ellen DeGeneres (Anastasia) and Taylor Swift (Jenna) as potential heroines, with Anastasia qualifying that "Taylor Swift is kinda the innocent princess type." In general, these comments were consistent with participants' celebrity preferences. When asked to select their favorite celebrities, all the participants mentioned White actors such as Kate Walsh (*Grey's Anatomy*), David Tennant (*Dr. Who*), Ethan Hawke (*Daybreakers*), and Robert Pattinson (*Twilight series*). When qualifying these choices for favourite characters, the participants first referred to the actors as physically attractive, "gorgeous" (Anastasia); popular, "everyone just obsesses over him" (Christina); and, attributed to personality, "hilarious" (Anastasia). This privileging of White people over people of colour extended to their discussions of "good" and "evil" characters, with demonstrated preferences that supported dominant radicalized perceptions of heroines in popular media (Fiske, 2011).

As Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003) found in their analysis of fairy tales that have persisted over the years, "often there is a clear link between beauty and goodness, most often in reference to younger women, and between ugliness and evil" (p. 718); furthermore, "beauty becomes associated not only with goodness but also with whiteness" (p. 719). Our participants aligned with Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz's (2003) findings, in that they also associated good with beautiful and White and evil with ugly and non-White. In these ways, participants' discussions of popular culture fairy tale plots seemingly were consistent with Disney's "standard values-and-dreams package" (Bacchilega, 1997, p. 143), with heroic men and rescued women (Baker-Sperry, 2007; Zipes, 2002a, 2002b).

Discussing Snow White and the Huntsman

Exploring alternative representations: No more damsels in distress. When provided with several images from *Snow White and the Huntsman* and asked about their expectations for the film prior to viewing it, the participants indicated that they expected that the film version would deviate from Disney adaptations: "it [film] would be more realistic... non-typical Snow White [with] a new spin on things that you would never see in a Disney version" (Emma). After viewing the film, the participants confirmed their preference of *Snow White and the Huntsman* over previous versions of the fairy tale, citing Snow White's strength and deviation from expected gender roles. Reflecting on a scene where Snow White escapes from her confinement by the queen, Christina stated, "I actually kind of liked how she escaped...because the actress [Kristen Stewart] that plays Snow White normally, she plays the damsel in distress...you wouldn't expect her to be, like, kicking some butt or trying to escape." Similarly, Anastasia stated, "I thought it was good the way she did it because she's thinking on her feet right away." She further explained how this escape deviated from her expectations of fairy tales, explaining that she thought "her boy crush from when she was little was going to be there with the horse" and questioning "why would the horse just be sitting there?" Thus, while Anastasia preferred Snow White's escape, she had expected the Prince to help rescue her and found it confusing when the Prince did not come to her aid.

Overall, the participants seemingly were surprised and receptive to Snow White taking control over her escape and thus her destiny, especially as the means she took to do so entailed jumping into a sewer. The participants viewed Snow White as "courageous" (Christina), "independent" (Anastasia), and "dirty" (Emma) and, thus, atypical of many representations of women in popular culture (Hodkinson, 2011; Strinati, 2004) and of notions of feminine gender representations in their lives.

There's no way that [the original] Snow White would have done that.
(Anastasia)

You wouldn't expect a woman to jump in the sewer because they're more proper, I guess, and it's not something you'd expect. You'd expect a guy to do that more than a girl." (Christina)

I like the idea of the fact that she just jumped into a sewer full of crap because no other princess or woman would ever have thought of doing that. (Emma)

Exploring alternative representations: Strong women require stronger men. The participants were supportive of Snow White as a strong female character, though only to the extent that she deviated from female gender expectations that allowed her to be as strong as the male characters. They seemingly were steadfast in their gendered expectations about the Prince and the Huntsman, offering harsh critique of any behaviour that was deemed to be feminine. They argued that Snow White was stronger than the Huntsman because “she was going to get dirty” (Anastaisia), whereas the Huntsman’s lack of dirtiness made him less like a man and therefore weak. Christina agreed, explaining that “she’s getting more dirty than him. Like, get on the ground. Get dirty, man, honestly. Act like a huntsman.” The other participants similarly were critical of the Prince:

He’s not what you kind of expect for...the typical prince, Normally, it’s blond hair, sometimes buff...He looked dirty and...scruffy...He didn’t really have the appeal or the stature or the whole effect of a prince. He just looked like a common person. (Anastaisia)

The participants’ perception of the Prince and the Huntsman was contingent on their alignment with hegemonic masculine representations (Connell, 1987, 2005, 2012) as connected to their social status. While Snow White was praised for “getting dirty,” the Huntsman was critiqued for being too clean, and the Prince for not being clean enough. Working-class masculinity (Connell, 2005) was expected of the Huntsman, and white-collar masculinity was expected of the Prince (Connell, 2005). As such, Snow White’s emotional and physical strength and ability were perceived as coming at the expense of the Huntsman’s masculinity; thus, to be weak means to be emasculated, intertwining disability and gender (Garland-Thomson, 2002).

Such rejection of the Prince and the Huntsman are connected with efforts to normalize such characters into neat masculine and able-bodied categories. As the Prince and the Huntsman are less able than Snow White, their masculinity becomes compromised. Importantly, “disabled women and men are either entirely absent in cultural productions or when we are present (in anything from fairy tales to literary texts), we act as metaphors for evil, dependency, failure, weakness, or tragedy” (Inckle, 2014, p. 394). Additionally, in Western society, masculinity is deeply connected with and often contingent on “residential and financial independence, as well as the attainment of emotional self-reliance, cognitive self-sufficiency, and behavioural self control” (Gibson et al., 2014, p. 110).

Exploring alternative representations: Strong women require happily-ever-heteronormative-after endings. The ways in which the participants viewed happy endings were complex and somewhat contradictory. They described how happy endings occur when a heteronormative couple “get married” (Emma) or are assumed to marry, as “it’s pretty obvious that they did get married” (Emma). As a result, “they end up being happy. Usually, it’s a guy and a girl getting together in the end” (Christina). Anastaisia qualified that “they need a gay movie,” with Christina elaborating that “it’s showing kids that it’s not right to do that [have a same-sex partner]...subliminal messages saying...a guy and a girl have to get together...[but] it doesn’t have to be.” However, as part of their final critique of the film, participants expressed dissatisfaction with the ending in ways that were seemingly inconsistent with their stated expectations that Snow White would be “different, really different” and that the film would “not really have that happy ending” (Jenna). At the

same time as praising Snow White's independence, they hoped for greater romance within the film—"the kissing scene was too brief" (Anastaisia)—and a happily-ever-after ending.

The participants explained conditions for happily-ever-after marriages, indicating that usually there is a girl from an "impoverished lifestyle" (Emma) who marries "the typical perfect guy" (Christina) who is "royalty" (Anastaisia). Christina described the princes, in turn, as "full of themselves, usually" and that they "always want the girl" and "want to be the hero." The participants listed some fairy tale heroines who were unmarried and sought alternative activities and adventures, such as "Belle [from *Beauty and the Beast*, who] wants to be able to read and...think for herself...She wants more intellect," and "Mulan...[who] wants to go out to the war" (Anastaisia). However, they also qualified these characters' desire for romance and "true love" (Emma); "really, all the girls do" (Anastaisia). In similar ways, the Disney character Mulan has been described by some as feminist because she takes on the role of a soldier, but others have critiqued the ways in which Mulan is represented as Americanized and commercialized (Dong, 2006) as well as constrained by her femininity and domestic ties (Dong, 2006; Taber, 2013b). Additionally, both Belle and Mulan (the latter in the sequel, *Mulan II*) do indeed get married to the heroes in their tales.

After watching *Snow White and the Huntsman*, the participants explained that they felt the film's ending was insufficient for several reasons. First, they expressed doubts about Snow White's abilities to rule the kingdom. They alluded to a lack of cognitive abilities, maturity, leadership skills, and/or some combination of these factors, while indicating that Snow White would require assistance from male protagonists:

[Snow White] actually has to do a lot of work to change everything around...they only trust her because of her father...[She cannot do it] by herself, but I think with her advisors and William and Duke and everyone helping her, yeah, she will. (Emma)

Such concerns over Snow White's ability to rule the kingdom tie into dominant discourses of women as emotionally unstable and unable to control their own lives. As Garland-Thompson (2002) stated, "The disability system functions to preserve and validate such privileged designations as beautiful, healthy, normal, fit, competent, intelligent—all of which provide cultural capital to those who can claim such statuses" (p. 8). The participants also developed a rationale why Snow White would not be able to experience a "happy ending" with the Huntsman (the character they perceived that she loved), citing class-based hierarchies:

The princess can't be with the Huntsman technically...You have to be with the Prince if you're a princess or king with the queen. (Anastaisia)

What's gonna happen because they're [*Snow White and the Huntsman*] in true love? You have to be married to royal blood...with Snow White being pure, if she marries someone that's not pure or of royalty, what's gonna happen to her image? (Christina)

In light of these difficulties, the participants attempted to enforce a happily-ever-after and an overcoming story in the film, perhaps unconsciously reinforcing gender, ability, and class lines where "the overcoming status is achieved by the performance (and, perhaps even *hyper-performance*) of 'normal' gender and social roles" (DeVolder, 2013, p. 748, italics in

original). “There would have had to be a wedding...[with Snow White] continu[ing] the line” (Anastasia) and Snow White “officially knight[ing] the Huntsman” (Christina). Jenna somewhat disagreed, however, explaining that she did “think it was a happy ending...she did prove herself, that she can take on the responsibility of a queen, and everybody can trust her because of what she did,” although “there could have been...a wedding and all that.” The participants seemed to be expecting the “marriage ending [that] is the illusion of a mutually satisfying relation between men and women in patriarchy” (Seifert, 2004, p. 67).

However, while desiring happily-ever-after in the film, the participants explained that such endings would not be possible (or were not desired) in their own lives, indicating that they, like the participants in Jarvis’s (1999) study, did not passively accept popular culture representations of romance. Emma explained this at length:

Even when you do get married and have kids, it’s not all happy ending either, because...a lot of parents struggle...their husbands walking out on them, or their mother walked out on them...I play on both sides of the team...most of my family don’t know that...my mom wants me to have kids. Well, if I marry a girl, then that’s not really gonna happen anyway.

Other participants reinforced that happily-ever-afters, although based on romantic relationships in popular culture, were based in self-determination and self-contentment:

Just being generally happy. You don’t have to be in love to be happy. You’ve got to be happy with yourself before you’re happy with someone else. (Christina)

I think, in terms of my life, I don’t have to be married to someone...But I feel that, in order to have a happy ending kind of thing, I think children would be involved. (Anastasia)

To be just what I want to do in life, like, what my dream job would be. So I don’t want to get married, but that’s just me, and I don’t want kids of my own. (Jenna)

Interestingly, while the participants recognized and critiqued romantic happy endings in fairy tales and real life, they still were critical of *Snow White and the Huntsman* for its atypical ending. The allure of a heteronormative romantic happily-ever-after, so prominent in popular culture (Fiske, 2011; Jarvis, 1999) and fairy tales (Baker-Sperry, 2007; Zipes, 2002a, 2002b), had a persistent effect on the ways in which the participants interacted with the film. While the participants wanted to be happy in their own lives without dependence on a man, they still argued that Snow White, even as a strong, independent character, needed to be paired with a man as a woman and a ruler. Their expectations reflected Fiske’s (2011) argument that, in popular media, “the romantic nature of women means that they can find true happiness only in the love of a man, not in a career or other satisfactions” (Fiske, 2011, p. 95). While participants critiqued the common understanding of happily-ever-after, they also worked to reinforce it, supporting an age-old myth of “heterosexual complementarity, in which the romantic couple finds perfect happiness because of a purportedly inevitable bond between men and women” (Seifert, 1996, p. 102).

Conclusion

Participants began these conversations with differing considerations about gender and happy endings as represented in popular culture, with the media group seemingly providing two participants with a first opportunity to engage in a gender critique. The participants varied in their critique of beauty, domesticity, female passivity, and heteronormativity in fairy tales. They identified stereotypical, traditional, gendered representations where central characters were often presented as young, beautiful women in need of saving or as strong, independent men who protected and saved others, consistent with other research about the content of fairy tales (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003; Zipes, 2002a). They also recognized how the film version of *Snow White* defied such traditional representations in terms of there being a strong female who demonstrated courage, independence, and self-determination. However, they predicted that *Snow White* would require assistance from older, more knowledgeable males to rule the kingdom, despite her ability to "rescue herself." They were also critical of the Prince and Huntsman characters, finding them to be lacking in the context of expected performances of masculinity (Connell, 2005). That is, while they accepted the masculinization of women, they rejected men who did not engage in hegemonically masculine behaviours. Furthermore, their responses were racialized in that they suggested that White actors assume "good" characters while actors of colour assume "evil" ones.

The women were cognizant of Disney notions of happily-ever-after endings as contingent on engagement in heteronormative relationships, critiquing them and recognizing them as unrealistic, and even unwanted, in context of their lives. Despite their strong critique of these endings, however, the participants also expressed an equally strong desire for one in *Snow White and the Huntsman*. Specifically, they developed several alternative endings that reinforced gendered and classed elements of stereotypical happily-ever-afters, expressing discontent with the alternative option presented in the film. In their desire for traditional fairy tale endings, the participants reflected Puleo's (2009) findings that readers expect marriages at the end of children's books. Fairy tale endings that uphold such heteronormative gender relations become desired despite their disconnection from the lived realities of the participants. Such desire for heteronormative fairy tale endings reflects Strinati's (2004) argument that "popular culture offers a fantasy, surrogate world to its consumers, not the real world they actually live in" (p. 166). Furthermore, media texts allow heteronormative gender roles to be dramatized in ways that are enjoyable, but in doing so, operate to re-legitimize gender norms. In this way, popular media such as film "can never be radically free from the power structure of the society within which it is popular" (p. 106). Therefore, it is important for post-secondary educators to acknowledge the learning potential of popular culture texts in order to problematize and engage with its content (Tisdell, 2008).

Although this research was undertaken with a select group of participants, it corroborates findings from previous studies exploring intersects across gender and ability (e.g., Garland-Thompson, 2002; Roets et al., 2008; Taber, Woloshyn, & Lane, 2012) and provides impetus for continued exploration about how participation in semi-structured, informal discussions can ignite social critique. Importantly, as Giroux (2011) argued, film "enables conversations that connect politics, personal experiences and public life to larger social issues" (p. 689). Groups such as the one developed in this study can allow young adults

an entry point to critique gender in media, with extensions into broader social contexts and their lives. In the first part of our research with the participants, discussed here, we began with critiquing gender. Over subsequent sessions (Taber et al., 2014), we explored the intersections between gender, race, class, and ability. It was not that the participants developed their ability to engage in a societal critique in a linear chronological way, but that moments of critique were interspersed in our conversations. Furthermore, our aim was to create space for discussion that gave voice to women with disabilities, not to define their participation by their dis/ability.

The findings serve as a reminder to practitioners of the importance of engaging in critical discussions. They also highlight the ways in which popular culture is implicated in the everyday lives of college students (Giroux, 2004), providing a platform from which practitioners can encourage exploration of discourses and ideologies that position students in varying gendered, abled, classed, and raced positionalities. Our group offered an alternative, critical approach to student support through which we began to explore social structures and power relations in connection with lived experiences. Like Giroux (2011), we view film discussion groups as opportunities to inspire questioning of “existing social, cultural, and institutional machineries of power” (p. 689) that may further support civic education and public engagement. Within the context of student development centres, opportunities for critique and questioning may shift individualized conversations regarding academic achievement, accommodations, and personal development toward broader social critique of ways that gender and ability norms impact their lived experiences.

These participants interact daily with gendered media representations that are prevalent in schooling and society and that privilege masculinized, able-bodied norms and representations. Unpacking discourses of normalcy supports social justice approaches to dismantling systems of marginalization and power relations within education and broader social systems (Liasadou, 2014). We argue that it is important that post-secondary institutions provide opportunities for students to explore and critique gendered representations in popular culture, as well as how these representations may intersect with concepts of ability, self-identity, and societal expectations.

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