Heteronormative Stereotypes in Children's Animated Television

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Heteronormative Stereotypes in Animated Children’s Television

A summary of research by Nora Kavaldjian

Lois Lane and Superman from Superman: The Animated Series

Introduction
The socializing effect that television has on child viewers is incredibly important to childhood development – research shows that children can model roles and behaviors that they observe on television – and this power to condition children’s minds to a television-based view of reality can influence children’s conceptions of gender, stereotype, and diversity. Children exposed to television media will base their conceptions of the world on what they’ve seen, usually animated cartoon shows with highly stereotyped characters in fairly set roles (Barcus 1983, Bandura, 2002). The purpose of this paper is to review research on the subject of gender roles in animated children’s media and, using this research, to gauge whether or not animated children’s television programming consistently portrays heteronormative gender stereotypes as “normal” as well as whether or not children may mimic or model the stereotypical behavior (in regards to gender roles and expression) that they have observed.

Works Cited
Bottom right illustration by Nora K.

Conclusion
My goal with this research project is to encourage researchers to initiate original studies focused on understanding how children react to and are conditioned by continuous heteronormative modeling, to the end of better understanding how children develop in terms of psychological gender, sexuality, and perceptions of gender/sexuality/the nature of real-world (not cartoon) people from an early age. With the ideas from the resultant research in mind, the heads of the television industry could thus initiate changes – either in regulation or in choices made in hiring/etc. – to change what may be harmful stereotypes present in their products, to make cartoon shows more applicable to real life and more well-rounded so that the children influenced by them will not end up with misconceptions about gender and gender representation that can lead to later psychological harm to the bearer and general prejudice and bias towards others.

Results
The results indicate that animated TV shows definitely show gender stereotypes and stereotypical behavior that can be recognized by adults and scientifically quantified (Bresnahan et al., 2003, Baker et al., 2007); coupled with the years of research that show how children react to television at different ages (Kirkorian et al., 2008), there is an obvious missing link of research between the two which will show how children actually react to said gender stereotypes and heteronormative behaviors. More research in this particular area of study will be needed to produce concrete results, but I am sure that there are articles available that specifically track children’s reactions to gender stereotypes in animated media – and will likely indicate that children will end up mimicking and modeling the behavior they’ve seen on TV.

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