**“Doc McStuffins”: Breaking Stereotypes and Empowering Children**

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Abstract

The Disney Junior television series “Doc McStuffins” is an educational, stereotype-breaking show that teaches kids how to take care of themselves and their friends. The current children’s television lineup is in desperate need of diversity, and stereotypes about race and gender formed in childhood can last for the rest of a person’s life. The show stars a six-year-old black girl who wants to be a doctor just like her mom, and Doc is an incredible role model for young children of any race to aspire to be, but especially young black girls. Children who watch shows like “Doc McStuffins” will grow up with a wider perspective on their world, less fear when going to the doctor, and valuable life skills that prepare them to be more loving and accepting members of society.

Introduction

When children are young, they have big dreams, and it is important for us as a society to encourage them in whatever they want to pursue. A lot of this encouragement comes from the kinds of characters we put on children’s TV shows. It is critically important for children’s self-esteem to show them characters that look like them and do things that they want to do, and this is something that Disney Junior’s “Doc McStuffins” does very well.

The show centers around the life of a six-year-old African American girl named Dottie McStuffins (her friends and parents call her Doc), who wants to be a doctor just like her mom, a pediatrician. Doc was gifted with a magical stethoscope that enables her to bring her toys to life and give them check-ups, and each episode ends with every toy that Doc treats feeling better. Over the course of its four seasons, the show has gotten many positive reviews from moms, kids and news outlets alike, who all commend the show’s creator, Chris Nee, for breaking many typical television stereotypes, including centering the show around an African American family in which the father stays at home most of the time and the mother is a doctor (Barnes). Nee got the idea for the show from her son Theo, who was very scared of the doctor, and as a mother she wanted to assuage his anxiety (Barnes). African American mothers were excited that their daughters were seeing strong female role models on TV that look like them, and children love the cheerful original songs and charming characters featured in each episode (Puglise). The show teaches children that doctors are not scary; they want to help people, even if it may hurt a little bit sometimes. It also shows little girls in particular that they can pursue anything they want to do, even a stereotypically male career like a doctor. “Doc McStuffins” breaks television stereotypes all across the board and marks a welcome shift in children’s programming.

This shift in programming content could not have come at a better time. Television is incredibly powerful for influencing stereotype development in children and their self-esteem. For me, as a young white girl, I had many role models in television and movies to look up to that looked like me. Young black girls did not always have that luxury, as media companies stuck to programming white characters because white dolls sold better (Barnes). Now with the turning cultural tide it is becoming more important for programmers to broaden the range of shows that are shown to children, as those shows have such a large impact on their viewers. Children are like sponges; they soak up anything and everything they can learn as their frontal lobes develop. When they have characters on TV that they can emulate, it does wonders for their self-esteem. But when shows present negatively stereotyped characters, in race or in gender, children assume those stereotypes at an alarmingly fast rate. The media industry, unfortunately, has a messy history when it comes to perpetuating race and gender stereotypes, as was demonstrated by the #OscarsSoWhite and #MeToo movements. However, there is always a chance at redemption, and children’s programming is a good place to start.

Because children are at such a sensitive developmental stage when they watch these shows, it is up to media outlets to recognize the importance and impact their shows have and program diverse and culturally representative content accordingly. When Nee was developing “Doc McStuffins,” it was Disney executives that encouraged her to make Doc a young black girl; she was white in Nee’s original proposal (Barnes). This shows how aware Disney has become of the power they have to program children’s shows and movies. This awareness has become increasingly evident in recent years with the addition of Princess Tiana to the Disney canon and movies like “Coco” and “Moana” showcasing accurate, non-stereotypical cultural representation. It is up to media outlets like Disney to use their programming for good. They need to recognize the responsibility and power their shows have and include more diverse characters to suit a wider audience. If this is done, they will be an instrumental part of shaping the next generation into more accepting, empowered and loving adults.

“Doc McStuffins” is not just an entertaining show for preschoolers. It marks an important, and arguably long overdue, transition in children’s television toward showing more counter-stereotypical characters. The show’s characters discredit many gender and racial stereotypes, and children learn to not be afraid of the doctor as well. It is important to discuss the show’s contribution to the media stereotype conversation, and to provide theoretical context for stereotype formation, as well as methods by which harmful stereotypes can lose their power on the human psyche. “Doc McStuffins” is a great start toward a diverse future in children’s programming and a necessary first step for media companies to recognize the impact their programming has on the next generation of world leaders. A content analysis of the show itself and current research surrounding stereotypes in the media will provide insight as to what messages the young viewers are receiving and how these messages are important for a child finding his/her place in society.

Literature Review

Negative stereotypes of African Americans in the media have been perpetuated in the media for a very long time, arguably for far too long. Starting in Old Hollywood, the only roles black actors could play were those of servants, slaves or “mammy” roles involving caretaking. Even Hattie McDaniel, one of the most talented actresses of her time, was limited to playing “mammy” roles; she became the first black woman to win an Oscar in 1940 for such a performance in “Gone with the Wind” (Hobson). These roles put black actors in a state of servitude, in which they had to be docile and humble, and their race limited their portfolios. Unfortunately, this type of role has not died out entirely, with “The Help” in 2011 still having incredibly talented black actors portray maids (Brooks). Another black stereotype in the media is that of young black men, as they comprise many of the criminals reported on local television news. These kinds of media portrayals significantly influence viewers’ implicit attitudes, or gut feelings, towards young black men as a whole group, which in turn influences their outward attitudes toward these men, even if they are law-abiding citizens (Aredt). The portrayals also influence viewers’ social judgments in terms of race (Mastro). Even though black representations in the past have not been very flattering, there have been multiple positive portrayals in the media recently. One amazing role model in recent years is Michelle Obama. During her time as First Lady alongside her husband Barack, she was able to balance the traditional expectations and responsibilities surrounding her role while also being a powerful voice herself and embracing her uniquely black beauty (Quinlan). Obama was never afraid to speak her mind, even in the face of multiple critics, especially on her Twitter account, where she freely expressed her black feminist views in this social media age (Tyree). Marvel’s “Black Panther,” also, was a massive hit at the box office, as audiences were delighted with the black actors in Wakanda. The characters in this movie comprise a powerful royal family, roles not usually relegated to black actors.

As much as media companies are trying to keep up with the demand for counter-stereotypical content, current research shows that both the negative and positive portrayals influence the self-esteem and self-efficacy of black viewers. Seeing their own race portrayed as one type of person makes them doubt their worth and their abilities. A study done by Meghan Sanders and her colleagues used the stereotype content model to examine multiple black characters on television, and they found that African American viewers still had a negative judgment of those characters even when positive stereotypes were present (Sanders). Another study by Moon Lee and his colleagues found that “many heavy television viewers hold ethnic stereotypes” when perceptions were assessed based on the big five personality traits (extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness). This does not bode well for media companies or for black viewers, but there are ways to combat the effects of these stereotypes. Mothers can have conversations with their children about how a certain character is being falsely portrayed, and Hannah Goodall argues in her paper on media’s influence on gender stereotypes that media literacy is one way to combat stereotypes’ effects on self-esteem. She says that “negative effects of media messages are especially harmful on an audience of young viewers who may not possess the intellectual tools that allow them to distinguish which messages are meant as storytelling functions.” This media literacy involves education surrounding common stereotypes and intentional conversations about how they are not true and should not influence attitude or behavior (Goodall). Another strategy researched is active mediation, in which an intentional conversation takes place with children about stereotyped characters in shows to dissuade any harmful effects the stereotyped characters may have (Nathanson). In these ways all viewers young and old can examine media stereotypes of their own race or others and filter out what is untrue and harmful.

There are many theories surrounding how people form stereotypes and the corresponding brain processes that psychologists have proposed. Stereotypes help humans categorize our world and the insane number of stimuli our brains receive on a daily basis; psychologists call this social categorization. This process involves sorting individuals into different categories, usually “based on easily identified characteristics, such as ethnicity, age and sex” (Etaugh). These categories remain broad until differentiating information about the person is uncovered. For example, if a person is in the grocery store and sees a small child with a bow in its hair, he/she might assume that that child is a little girl, because that person has categorized hairbows into the category of young girls. According to this theory, if the only exposure a person has to a certain ethnicity is on TV or in a movie, positive and negative generalizations can be made very quickly. A study on this by Yuki Fujioka and her colleagues “demonstrated that the media could affect one’s impression of other races and further suggested the effects of mass media are more significant when direct information is limited.” Another theory related to stereotype formation is social role theory. This theory applies to the traditional social roles of different groups and the certain traits and behaviors associated with those roles. This is why people normally associate cooking, cleaning and other “communion” traits with women and being the CEO of a big corporation and other “agency” traits with men (Etaugh). This is also why people in the 1930s and 40s would have associated older black women with the “mammy” role; this was their social role at that time. According to the research of Bradley Gorham, looking at this theory through a semiotics lens, he found that our brains associate certain signs and symbols, like the mammy costumes Hattie McDaniel would wear in her movies, with certain social-level racial myths, and it is very difficult to undo this kind of association, like the color combination of red, white and blue brings up feelings of patriotism in many Americans.

Both of these theories provide a framework for how humans form stereotypes, and this starts in childhood. One of the main sources that children have for forming their beliefs about the world is their media. Unfortunately, children’s television channels have not done a good job in the past of showing diverse characters and counter-stereotypical gendered behavior. A viewer does not have to look very far to find extremely gendered shows. Just like the toy aisles, media companies have separated shows for girls and shows for boys, in content rather than in name. Just watch an episode of “Spongebob Squarepants” and an episode of “Shimmer and Shine” to know that to be the truth. Beth Hentges and her colleagues did a content analysis on children’s television shows on Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon and Disney Channel, and they found that Disney Channel showed the least gender stereotyped behavior of the three (Hentges). Not all children’s television is so gender-split; shows like “Paw Patrol” and “Bubble Guppies” appeal to young children of both genders. Some educational programs do not show a lot of gender-stereotyped behavior (Martin). However, the educational shows that are very gendered show children specific traits according to the gender of the characters, in accordance with social role theory. Girls’ shows like “Shimmer and Shine” and “My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic” teach friendship, teamwork and conflict resolution, communal traits commonly attributed to girls. Conversely, boys’ shows like “Jake and the Neverland Pirates” and “Paw Patrol” teach leadership and problem-solving, agentic traits commonly attributed to boys. No matter how fantastical these shows may be in content, to the preschool- or school-age child, the gender messages come through loud and clear (Taggart). More research could be done with children in a classroom setting to see how these messages play out in a child’s day-to-day interactions with their friends, and one-on-one interviews could be conducted with school-age children to determine how they really view their peers based on the shows they watch.

Recently, however, much of children’s media has evolved beyond the stereotypical gender roles to include gender and ethnically diverse characters, to the benefit of the child viewers. Media companies have started to realize how malleable children’s brains are, and how important it is that the next generation of world leaders be exposed to counter-stereotypical messages at a young age, so that they may grow up to be more accepting and loving adults. “Doc McStuffins” marks this dramatic shift in the script. The show stars a young black girl named Dottie McStuffins who wishes to emulate her mother, a pediatrician. Her father is a stay-at-home dad, and she has one biological little brother and an adopted little sister. In each episode, Doc uses her magical stethoscope to bring her toys to life and give them check-ups (Barnes), healing their boo-boos and helping them not be scared of the doctor. This was the whole purpose of the show, according to the creator Chris Nee, who wanted her five-year-old son to be less scared of going to the doctor for his asthma (Puglise). When the show premiered on Disney Junior in 2012, black mothers all over the country rejoiced, as their children could watch a show about a little girl who looked like them. The show throws all kinds of gender and racial stereotypes out the proverbial window, as a black mother is a doctor and a black father stays at home and is devoted to his children. According to Nee, to Disney’s credit, it was their idea to make Doc a little black girl; she herself had not decided the race of her main character before then (Barnes). As Hentges’ study showed, Disney as a media producer has done the best job among the children’s network channels of showing the most diverse gender behavior. Even their recent films, starting with “Mulan” in 1999 and continuing with “The Princess and the Frog,” “Moana” and “Coco,” are beginning to show characters from non-European cultures in a counter-stereotypical, culturally accurate context. But “Doc McStuffins” is the company’s first foray of this kind into preschool-age children’s programming, and the rave reviews from mothers all over the country show the success of that decision. The show provides examples of both communal and agentic traits that appeal to both genders. It helps white children develop a broader mental category for the black people they may encounter, and it empowers black children, especially little girls, to pursue any career they wish and do it well.

Methods

For my research on how the children’s show “Doc McStuffins” subverts gender and racial stereotypes, I conducted a textual analysis of the current research on gender and racial stereotypes in the media and how they influence viewers from different racial and gender backgrounds, as well as the show itself. I took a critical perspective to this analysis to examine how powerful these stereotypes are in influencing our culture at large, especially children, and the behavior of those who subscribe to the stereotypes’ various implications. I used my personal Disney+ subscription to screen four random episodes of each of the first three seasons of “Doc McStuffins,” as during these seasons of the show, Doc is running her own clinic from her backyard. I looked at how Doc was interacting with her patients, specifically when telling them their diagnosis and handling the patient’s reaction, to see how confident she was and whether she ever doubted her own expertise, which are non-stereotypical behaviors for her gender as a whole, while still being kind and genuinely wanting her patients to feel better. I also looked at the different prosocial and healthy behaviors she taught her friends along the way. With two patients per episode, and four episodes screened from three seasons, 24 patient interactions total were analyzed.

Analysis

Six-year-old Dottie “Doc” McStuffins is a young black girl who is also an accomplished doctor for toys. Each episode of “Doc McStuffins” contains two segments with two different stories. Each story focuses around one of Doc’s toys and a problem or conflict they face, with Doc giving them a check-up and usually some good advice. Doc operates from her clinic in her backyard, and with the help of her assistant, nurse Hallie the hippo, she is able to give any toy, or toy pet in season three, a check-up and provide treatment. When a toy is nervous for a check-up, she makes sure to explain every tool she uses and always sings her check-up song for reassurance; she even says, “It’s ok if you giggle; this will only tickle a little.” In her patient interactions, Doc combines both agentic and communal traits: she problem-solves and gives her own diagnoses, while still providing comfort and reassurance at the same time. Sometimes, the diagnosis is not so clear, but Doc never gives up until she figures out what’s wrong. She is also not afraid to ask for help from a “specialist” when she needs it (usually her mom) and always admits her mistakes. When Doc ripped her best friend Lambie’s plush by accident, she immediately apologized to Lambie, took full responsibility for the rip and promised that she would fix Lambie no matter what it took. When Doc realized that the rip would require stitches, she asked her mom to help sew Lambie back up and was right there beside her to assist with the procedure (S1:E16). In each episode Doc and her friends teach child viewers tips to stay physically and mentally healthy. When a fire truck named Lenny stopped squirting water from his hose, Doc is confused as to why. When her mom brings her a glass of water, as it is a hot day, Doc figures out that Lenny is dehydrated, and sings a song with her friends about drinking enough water and staying hydrated while playing outside (S1:E4). When a glowing monster named Glow-Bo loses his glow and a lot of his energy, Doc realizes that he has been in the dark toybox in her brother Donny’s room for at least two weeks. She diagnoses him with “no-glow-atosis,” and she and her friends sing a song about getting exercise and sunshine to stay healthy (S1:E23). When a water-squirting toy named Sam drinks green apple soda instead of water, he gets all sticky and isn’t able to squirt anymore. Doc teaches him that sugary drinks are ok every once in a while, but water and healthy foods are the better choices for your body (S2:E21). Not only does Doc teach her friends and viewers about healthy behaviors for your body, but she also teaches social skills to her lovable bunch of toys. When Queen Amina tries to direct the other toys in rebuilding a destroyed toy castle, they say that she is bossy and really hurts her feelings. Doc teaches them that being a good leader and being bossy are two different things, and that “she’s not bossy, she’s the boss” (S3:E6). When Donny’s Commander Crush toy is tickled too much by Gloria the gorilla and his transformation button gets stuck, he doesn’t want to play the tickle game anymore, because he asked Gloria to stop and she didn’t listen. Doc gently admonishes Gloria for not listening and sings a song about listening for “stop” and “no” as cue words from your friends (S2:E30). When the knight Sir Kirby and the daring Princess Perry get into a fight over whether a princess can do knightly things, like rescuing people from towers, they compete and realize that they are actually equals, and Sir Kirby apologizes (S2:E21). And even though Doc is a very accomplished doctor and vet for toys, she is still a kid, and learns some important lessons along the way herself. When Doc gets invited to her first sleepover, she takes Lambie and her dragon Stuffy with her, but gets a little homesick at bedtime. Lambie and Stuffy draw a picture of her family and friends at home and it makes Doc feel a lot less sad (S2:E13). When Doc’s parents tell her and Donny that they are going to adopt another baby, Doc’s mom gives her a baby doll to practice being a good babysitter. Doc and her friends figure out how to feed & burp the baby, change her diaper and calm her down when she cries (S3:E21). Doc is a strong, smart, opinionated little girl who is devoted to taking care of her patients in the best way she knows how, and any child watching her can’t help but be inspired to greatness. With her lovable bunch of stuffed and plastic friends by her side, there is nothing Doc can’t handle. The Doc is in, and she is always here to help.

Discussion

Many children’s shows do not teach a lot of valuable life skills, and often portray common gender and racial stereotypes in its characters. Negative racial stereotypes have abounded in the media for years and, as the research shows, are very harmful to viewers of any race, especially the young, malleable brains of children. And when a show subscribes to certain societal myths, as Gorham’s research shows, the resulting stereotypes that form are very difficult to sway. But a parent would be hard-pressed to find any of these things in “Doc McStuffins.” Going into my research, I knew that the show was great, but it truly was a treat for me to watch the show again in light of the current literature. This series teaches children tips for taking care of their bodies, being better friends, how to overcome hardships in their own lives and how to solve problems that seem unsolvable. With this many different skills being taught to child viewers, as well as an undercurrent of breaking gender & racial stereotypes for adults to pick up on, this series presents itself as a groundbreaking educational children’s show for any child and parent to enjoy, and it fulfills the promises it makes. Doc is an amazing role model for any child to emulate, as she does not give up until she solves her patients’ cases, and she is always there for her friends with a listening ear and gentle advice. Her crew of stuffed and plastic friends show kids that it is ok to make mistakes, and it is ok to go to someone you trust for help when you have a problem or an injury. These indispensable life skills and stereotype-breaking characters are what make “Doc McStuffins” a timeless, timely and fun addition to any child’s TV show lineup. And when this generation of kids grow up into adults, if they have watched and loved this show, they can change the world for the better. The Disney+ description of the show says it best: “The series emphasizes the importance of lending a helping hand, or paw, when people and toys need it most.”

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